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THE EXECUTOR

THE EXECUTOR

A Novel

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER (HARRIS)

AUTHOR OF

THE WOOING O'T, 'WHICH SHALL IT BE?' 'THE FRERES,' 'HER DEAREST FOE.
AND 'LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP.'



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME I.

LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY & SON, NEW BURLINGTON ST.

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen

1883

Printed by R. & R. CLARK, Edinburgh.



THE EXECUTOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE young ladies of the Misses Boaden's establishment, Elmwood House, Forest Hill, had dispersed for the hour of recreation permitted on summer evenings.

A couple strolled to and fro with linked arms in deepest conversation ; one of somewhat heavy aspect sat under a lilac bush laboriously conning a lesson. The rest were playing croquet (lawn-tennis was in its infancy as yet) on a tolerably large space of grass in which the garden terminated, and which was mentioned in the Misses Boaden's prospectus as "The Grounds."

The players, however, were evidently knocking the balls about in a purposeless manner, and had not settled to a regular game, while a running fire of conjecture and question ran from mouth to mouth.

“Where is Stasie?”

“Isn’t Stasie Verner coming?”

“Oh, she will not be long!”

“She is writing letters, I think.”

“What a shame, when she promised to be my partner!”

“Run, Dolly, and ask if she is coming.”

“No, I won’t! There she is looking out of the window: call to her.”

Chorus—“Now you know Miss Amelia will not let us shout.”

Vigorous dumb show, waving of hands and beckoning, answered by a serious shake of the head, conveying decided refusal.

Stasie Verner—now kneeling before the window of her bedroom, her elbows resting on the low sill, while she gazed dreamily out over the garden—a discontented, even sad look darkening her young face—was the leading spirit of the school: first, she was the eldest, except the pupil-teacher, Ella Mathews; secondly, she was of a bold and daring disposition, disposed to take full advantage of any superiority nature might have allotted her; thirdly, she had a remarkably sharp tongue; and finally, though her means were limited, she

had a certain munificence of nature, that recommended her more to her companions than to her teachers.

A tap on the door roused her from her thoughts or dreams some minutes after she had shaken her head in token of refusing her schoolfellows' invitation; she rose slowly and stood still for a moment before uttering, not too amiably, "Come in." A tall and already developed figure, upright and well rounded, a careless stateliness (if such a contradiction can be combined) in her carriage and the pose of her head, a confusion of very fair disordered hair, and a face too pale perhaps, though the skin was soft and creamy, broad browed, and narrowing to a delicate chin, lit up by a pair of eyes, uncertain as to colour, but dark compared to her hair and complexion, as were also the brows and lashes. Her expression was for the moment unmistakably impatient, not to say angry.

The door opened to admit a small slight girl, plain but pleasant looking, and exceedingly neat of aspect.

"Well! what is it, Ella? Am I never to have a minute's peace to think my own thoughts? I

tell you I will *not* go out to play croquet or any thing else ! it is too hot and too tiresome !” cried Stasie Verner.

“I have not come to ask you,” returned the other calmly, as she closed the door and advanced into the room. “The postman has brought you this letter, and one to me. Will you permit me to stay and read it ?” this with a tone of mock entreaty.

“A letter ! Oh, thank you, dear ! Even a letter is a blessed break, though I have no correspondents I care for ;” and she opened it with some eagerness, while her friend, drawing a chair to the window, proceeded to peruse hers, deliberately and attentively.

“Come,” said Stasie, her brow clearing, her eyes lighting up, “this is not so bad. It is an invitation from Mrs. Harding to go to them on Friday, and stay for a few days ; they hope to have a box to see Jeafferson (in *Rip Van Winkle*). Isn’t that perfectly delicious ? I know every word of the story, and I have so longed to see it acted.”

“Yes, I am glad ; I wish I could go too !” with a little sigh.

“So do I,” cried Stasie heartily. “What can I wear, Ella? I have nothing fit to be seen, and I am sick of rusty black; I really must insist on buying some new clothes while I am at the Hardings’.”

Miss Mathews did not answer, and seemed absorbed in her letter. “What have you got?” asked Stasie, squeezing herself on to the same chair with her friend. “Nothing very good,” she returned slowly, folding up her letter; “I am afraid Bob has been getting into some scrape again, though mother does not exactly say so, and she has not been very well herself, poor dear! The vicar has been asking about me; it seems he knows an old lady who wants an accomplished young one as companion, etc. etc. Alas! my accomplishments are few and far between.”

“But, Ella, you must not leave while I am here. Why, what would become of me? I should either mope to death, or quarrel with every creature, and be expelled as a nuisance!”

“‘There is many a slip,’” quoted Ella, “and I fear there is no such good luck as an engagement in store for me, though I am fitter for some such nondescript employment than to teach.”

“You can teach very well, if you only knew

the things to teach," said Stasie reflectively. "How I wish they would let me go back and live with your mother, Ella! Yours is the only home I ever knew! and then I might be a help, for I know I have some money—perhaps not much, but something I can call my own."

"Not till you are one-and-twenty. You may be sure Mr. Harding and the other executor will keep you tight enough while they can."

"I am not sure of anything," returned Stasie impatiently; "Mr. Harding is always so pleasant and good-natured when I am with him that I think he will do everything I want; and yet I never advance a step towards emancipation. Why, next month I shall be eighteen! and I have seen nothing—I know nothing. I can't help being a big baby! It would be almost better to have been shut up in a convent; there is some sort of romance, something *distingué*, about such seclusion; but a second-rate school in Forest Hill, with Saturday afternoons at the Crystal Palace, is the very essence of commonplace."

"But, Stasie, you are really not so badly informed, as girls go."

"Bah! I am utterly ignorant; and I should

be ignorant if I had taken honours in every University Exam. Can books teach me how to talk? how to eat, sit, stand, and comport myself like people in society? I shall never forget the only day I spent at my guardian's house. Everything was so strange, I felt afraid to speak; I could not shape my sentences in the light, droll, pleasant way the rest spoke. I was afraid to choose any of the dishes that were offered at luncheon, lest I should make a mistake in the manner of eating them. I felt stiff and awkward when I moved compared to the quiet easy manners of the other ladies; and though Lady Elizabeth was very kind, she altered her tone in some indefinable way whenever she addressed me, as if I were a half-reclaimed savage, to be dealt with carefully and indulgently. Oh, I cannot tell you the curious dread and longing I have to try another plunge into a life so different from all I have known, and yet——" she stopped abruptly.

"I think, Stasie, you are too ambitious and discontented," said her friend gravely. "Just think what it is to be certain of one's future—to have enough; I don't mean for the pleasure of being idle, but to be sure of food and raiment and

lodging, and be free to work at what you like best, without anxiety about any one."

"That's just it!" cried Stasie, jumping up to walk to and fro. "I have no one in the world to care about, which is as bad as having no one to care for me."

"No one, Stasie?" a little reproachfully.

"I *do* love you, Ella, and I am fond of your dear mother; but then I do not belong to you nor you to me; yet I would rather go and live with you—your people, I mean—at Islington, dull and slow as it is, than stay here or anywhere. Still I like some of the lessons very much, though I am not what you call intellectual. At any rate, I am sick of being shut up, and I intend to make a strong effort to escape when the other executor comes to England, and he must be here soon. He will help me, I am sure."

"I hope so. Now, had you not better sit down and answer Mrs. Harding's invitation, while I write a line to my mother?"

"I will, but there is plenty of time before prayers."

Nevertheless Miss Verner began to clear away the looking-glass from her small dressing-table,

setting forth upon it a shabby little writing-case and much besprinkled ink-bottle, and applied herself to the composition of a somewhat gushing acceptance.

Stasie, or according to her high-flown baptismal name, Anastasia Verner, was the daughter of a well-born but exceedingly unsuccessful younger son, who, after many follies and failures, had made a love match, and dying, left his widow an empty exchequer, a formidable amount of small debts, and a pretty fair-haired baby girl. The poor young mother was brave, self-helpful, and utterly devoted to her child, but her strength was undermined by grief and anxiety, and so overweighted in the struggle for existence.

Accident threw her into an evangelical circle, through the kind notice of the clergyman whose church she attended, and whose assistance she asked in her search for pupils. At the parsonage she met an elderly Syrian gentleman, who was for the time being a prime favourite with the Exeter Hall faction, and had brought a parcel and an introductory letter from a gifted missionary, then working amid the Jews scattered throughout Turkish Arabia, to the busy incumbent of an ob-

scure north-west district. But neither time, nor scorching heat, nor money making, nor consular cares (Christian Kharapet, Esq., as he loved to call himself, was British Consul at Mardīn, a town that had lately come into notice because of the mighty ruins discovered in its vicinity)—none of these had so exhausted his system or dulled his sight as to render him regardless or indifferent to the pensive delicate grace of the young widow. His fancy was pleased, and although she had neither money nor position, she stood well with many influential members of the party that petted and pushed him on the road to fortune. He felt he should do himself no harm by a disinterested marriage ; so he offered a safe home, and promised kindly companionship to the widow, and further baited his hook by undertaking to settle on her precious little daughter a sum sufficient to ensure the child against poverty.

Conscious of her own physical inability to protect or provide for her child, and vaguely hoping that rest and a genial climate might prolong her days until Stasie was old enough to take care of herself, Mrs. Verner accepted the old man's offer, and went away with him to his Eastern home,

taking Stasie, then about a year old, with her. Whether the poor young widow found the repose and security she hoped for, or withered under the influence of a life so unsuited to European habits and training, God only knows, but she did not survive her ill-assorted marriage two years. Her elderly husband bitterly mourned her loss, and transferred all his affections to his wife's little girl, who developed into the spoilt pet, the diminutive tyrant of the Consulate. When about six years old, however, she began to droop, her stepfather was terrified. He would even have paid large sums out of his painfully-gathered and rigidly-guarded hoard to restore his darling to her natural strength and vivacity, but where was he to find help? In his extremity he summoned what native skill was within reach, but in vain! At this juncture the missionary whose introduction had led to the establishment of little Stasie as queen of the Consulate, made his appearance at Mardīn, on his homeward journey, having been successful in his labours, and being recalled to report them by the society he represented.

Kharapet received him with embraces and

tears of joy. Here was a counsellor, a comforter, a saviour ! His advice was clear and short. " You must send the child to England at once," he said ; " she simply wants a European climate : she will die here."

" And what is to become of me without her ? " groaned Kharapet.

" Better part with her for a few years than lose her altogether," returned Mr. Mathews, the missionary. " After a few years you must pay another visit to London, and then she can return here with you, and be your companion for the rest of your days."

" Oh, the dreary years—the dreary years ! "

" They will soon pass," said the missionary consolingly. " Let her come home with me. Mrs. Mathews will take charge of her, and bring her up with our own dear ones in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, so that hereafter she may be a help to you in your favourite scheme of drawing nearer together the Nestorian and the English churches."

This project found favour in the eyes of the afflicted Consul, and after a keen encounter as to the terms to be given and received for the little

invalid's education and maintenance, Stasie Verner, attended by a Chaldean nurse, started for Alexandretta, on her westward journey.

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Arrived at the residence of the missionary's family, Stasie soon became one of them, and one of the noisiest. Here she was happy enough. Mrs. Mathews was no strong-minded disciplinarian, but she was kindly, honest, well-meaning, and not unjust. She kissed and cuffed the little stranger as she did her own children ; scolded or cried over them all according to the temper of the moment ; and the household scrambled on, not unhappily or uncomfortably—the girls getting what instruction they could at a neighbouring day-school, and occasional treats, wildy enjoyed, to the Crystal Palace or to Richmond, as the finances permitted. Mrs. Mathews managed as best she could for her little *protégée* ; the payments made on her account seemed far from munificent, but what cash passed through her reverend husband's clutches she neither asked nor knew.

When Stasie was about eleven, her stepfather was obliged, by public and private business, to

visit London—an ecstatic period for his adopted daughter, who enjoyed unlimited indulgence, and received unbounded promises of Arab steeds, jewels, attendants, and Heaven knows what, when she should resume her sway at Mardīn. The old gentleman was delighted by her progress, mental and physical, and agreed readily enough to her remaining three or four years longer.

These years brought many changes. First, the missionary succumbed to fever; this brought a serious diminution of means to the family, though the good man had not been improvident, and had managed to store up some small provision for wife and children. Stasie continued to reside with them, the money paid on her account forming an important item in the family budget.

Then one of the boys got an appointment abroad, and so much was lifted from the widow's burden. The eldest girl, Ella—Stasie's special friend—had begun to pine for greater educational advantages, that she might fit herself for self-support. Even Stasie, the idlest of the young group, most given to dreaming, and finding nearly pleasure enough in the harmony of mere healthy existence, nearly excitement enough in games of

cricket and battledore and shuttlecock, played in a large back-garden with which the old-fashioned Islington house was blessed, began to think she ought to do something, she knew not what.

She was always at the bottom of her class, always under punishment for neglected lessons, always the despair of her teachers, yet a bit of a favourite, for if she was saucy one hour she was kindly and helpful the next. Nor could she be considered quite ignorant. At times she was seized with a passion for reading story-books and a battered cheap edition of Shakespeare, that she had unearthed from behind a row of religious books in a nondescript apartment dignified by the name of "the Study," as also some stray volumes of Bulwer Lytton's, which latter did much to rouse her desire for knowledge. After reading *Zanoni*, she made up her mind to master the doctrines and tenets of the Rosicrucians when she returned to Syria, never doubting that she should there find some venerable mysterious priest who pursued profound scientific and astronomical researches under the deep blue of Eastern skies; but in the meantime she could not bend her mind to the low and narrow limits of spelling, grammar, geo-

graphy, and the multiplication table ! In which latter little Polly, the baby of the family, could beat her hollow.

While the months and years rippled by, scarce marked by any incident, Stasie began slowly to think of her return to Mardīn, and even of progress in her Rosicrucian studies, with less of unmixed pleasure. She had grown warmly attached to Ella, and even felt a sort of half-contemptuous liking for Bob, the second boy, destined for the medical profession ; besides, the aforesaid Bob had, to his mother's horror, made some delightful theatrical acquaintances, and occasionally received from them orders, which enabled him to treat his sister and Stasie to ecstatic glimpses of dramatic delight. This was a joy she (Stasie) could not expect to find at Mardīn, and for which the Arab steeds, the jewels, cloth of gold, salaaming attendants, and Rosicrucian priests would be but a poor exchange.

The period of trial and of separation was near at hand, and Stasie's courage had sunk lower and lower, when one day towards the close of February the startling news reached Mr. Kharapet's London agent and personal friend, Mr. Harding (of J. Hard-

ing and Co.), that H.B.M.'s Consul at Mardin had died suddenly, after a bath injudiciously taken immediately on his return from a long and fatiguing ride.

These tidings changed the aspect of Stasie Verner's life. She had now no home, and belonged to no one. Her father's people had simply disregarded her completely, and of her mother's, only an elderly lady, Miss Stretton, a grand-aunt, had ever taken the slightest notice of her.

Stasie was deeply and sincerely affected when Mr. Harding himself announced the loss of her only friend and protector.

This gentleman was not quite a stranger to her. From him Mrs. Mathews received the quarterly payments on account of her young *protégée*. He even visited the Islington residence at rare intervals, and held private interviews with the young lady, on whom he made a very favourable impression by the frank kindly *bonhomie* of his questions and friendly interest he seemed to take in her. She had spent a day occasionally at his handsome house near Regent's Park, where she had enjoyed herself in a spacious nursery with some pretty children, and been taken to drive in the Park by

Mrs. Harding, a soft-mannered, dark-eyed little woman.

“Your stepfather has not left you unprovided for,” said Mr. Harding, after a pause, to allow the freshly-orphaned girl’s tears unchecked course; “and I suppose that is all you care to know of such matters. I am one of the executors, and I am sure I need not say that I shall take particular care of your interests in every way. My co-executor is Hormuz Kharapet, your stepfather’s half-brother. I daresay you have never seen him. He lived chiefly at Bombay, where I knew him; but he is now at Mardīn. Poor Kharapet, rather unnecessarily, I think, has appointed, in addition to executors, a guardian, Mr. Percy Wyatt, who travelled in the East some years ago. Can you remember him? I think he must have been at Mardīn before you came to England.”

“My memory of everything at Mardīn is very shadowy,” returned Stasie, drying her tears, and trying to steady her voice. I vaguely remember some strange gentleman who used to take me on his knee and tell me stories, but it is like a dream.”

“I dare say it was Wyatt, just the sort of thing he would do! Well, he is away in Rome at present, and we can make no sort of change till he returns. I will not keep you any longer, my dear, for I have not much time, and I must have a talk with Mrs. Mathews. My wife shall come and see you in a day or two. You will always find us true friends.”

Stasie could only give him her hand in silence, and then escaped, to pour out her thoughts, her mingled grief and sense of isolation, to Ella, her most sympathetic *confidante*. Meantime Mr. Harding, with much civility, laid the state of Stasie's affairs before Mrs. Mathews, who gathered from his exposition that Kharapet had on his last visit to London made a will, bequeathing all he possessed to his stepdaughter,—that was now nearly three years ago,—and it remained to be proved whether he had since made another; also, to ascertain what amount of property he had left, respecting which Mr. Harding had no certain knowledge. In any case, he felt sure that Stasie would not be left penniless, and that for the present Mrs. Mathews might venture to keep Miss Verner as an inmate, without risk of loss. When

Mr. Percy Wyatt returned it was impossible to say what changes might take place, for which he (Mr. Harding) would be in no way responsible. Indeed, he believed a politician like Wyatt, and a woman of fashion like his wife, Lady Elizabeth, would take very little trouble about an obscure ward. Mr. Harding even doubted that Mr. Wyatt would accept the responsibility. To this Mrs. Mathews answered, with moist eyes, that with all her faults Stasie was like one of her own children to her, that she would miss her as much as any one of them, and that she was welcome to a home with her (Mrs. Mathews) until she was able to help herself, if indeed it were possible that a true Christian, as Mr. Kharapet seemed to be, could have the cruelty to leave Stasie penniless by any subsequent will.

So the matter remained for many months, during which the young orphan heard little or nothing of her own affairs, and continued to lead the same life as heretofore, broken by rare visits to Mrs. Harding, who was always kind and pleasant.

The only distinct information which reached

her good-natured protectress was conveyed by a message given as Mr. Harding was bidding Stasie good-bye one Sunday evening, when she was starting on her return home after passing the day at his house.

“Tell Mrs. Mathews, Stasie, that the will is all right, and you are properly provided for,” on receiving which Mrs. Mathews observed, “Thank the Lord ! for though one ought to have faith, it is hard to sit loose to this world with an empty pocket.”

The arrival of “Mr. O. Percy and Lady Elizabeth Wyatt, from a prolonged visit to the Continent,”—as announced in the *Morning Post*, soon after Christmas, made a great change in Stasie Verner’s existence.

She was formally introduced to her guardian at his own residence, whither she was taken by Mrs. Harding. He asked her a few questions politely but vaguely, apologised for the absence of Lady Elizabeth, who was not able to come up to town just yet, expressed his readiness to be of service to her in any way, and then bowed them out.

Soon after this interview poor Stasie was

informed of the terrible decision arrived at by executors and guardian—to remove her to a “high-class boarding-school,” the choice of which Mr. Wyatt was graciously pleased to say could not be in better hands than those of Mrs. Harding.

In due course and with many tears Stasie’s rather limited outfit was prepared, and she was deposited with those excellent ladies “the Misses Boaden.” But compensations sometimes come when least expected. Mrs. Mathews, with all her good nature, was generally on the look-out for chances, and finding there was room in Miss Boaden’s establishment for a pupil-teacher, succeeded in placing her eldest daughter Ella there, to the infinite comfort of her friend and *confidante*.

Time rolled on swiftly and silently in the monotony of school life ; Ella had already passed her nineteenth, while Stasie was approaching her eighteenth year, at the time this story opens, when the period of stillness and inactivity for the latter was in its last moments, and a total change was close at hand.



CHAPTER II.

STASIE had finished her note long before her friend ceased to write rapidly, and she still sat on, gazing at Ella without seeing her, while her thoughts strayed away to the dim distant past of her childhood in her stepfather's Syrian home, the half-forgotten realities of which were largely supplemented by a lively imagination, influenced no doubt by as extensive reading as her means permitted, on Eastern subjects. She was impatient for the arrival of the other executor, from whose interference on her behalf she expected so much, albeit she did not very clearly know what she wanted. Her leading idea was to leave school, to travel in Italy or Germany, or to return to the only home she ever knew. Latterly she had troubled herself more than she used as to her own future, as to whether the property bequeathed her was mere competence

or wealth ; on this point she had, on one or two of the rare occasions when she saw him, essayed to extract some distinct information from Mr. Harding, but in vain.

A friendly pat on the shoulder, a laughing assurance "that she need not disturb herself," "that she would always have cheese to her bread," was all her acting guardian deigned to say, so she was obliged to fall back on conjecture.

She had grown weary and indignant at the prolonged imprisonment to which she was subjected, now that she felt herself a woman, and fancied she was equal to guide her own steps. To be shut up with children and half-formed ignorant girls, by no means of the class that might be expected at an establishment of the pretensions affected by the Misses Boaden, was too bad ! for Stasie Verner, in spite of her middle-class training, was by nature an aristocrat, so far as hatred of vulgarity and meanness went.

While she sat musing with contracted brows, and a mouth half-sad, half-pouting, she became vaguely aware that the front-door bell sounded,

and that some one was being ushered into the drawing-room beneath, Elmwood House, in spite of its large name, being only one of a row of semi-detached villas slight as to construction and of small dimensions.

“It is late for a visitor,” said Ella Mathews, without looking up from her writing. “I want this posted by eight o’clock, and it must be seven now.”

“Not quite, I think,” returned Stasie dreamily. “I wish I had a watch! I wonder if——”

She did not finish her sentence, but lapsed into her own thoughts.

A moment or two after the door opened to admit the junior member of the firm, Miss Amelia Boaden, who held a card in her hand. “Stasie, there is a visitor below for you, your uncle, I believe,” offering her the card; “you had better come down and speak to him, my dear.”

Stasie started up, all quivering at this sudden fulfilment of her hopes, and taking the card, read the inscription thereon—

“Hormuz Kharapet, 23 Str. Mayfair.

“It is my stepfather’s brother, the executor!” exclaimed Stasie. “Oh! I am so glad! I did

not think he would be here so soon ;” and she made for the door.

“Stay, Stasie ! stay, my dear,” said Miss Amelia eagerly. “Had you not better smooth your hair and put on your best dress ? You are really——”

“My best dress,” interrupted Stasie scornfully. “Bad is the best ! I will go as I am, and then, if he has any feeling, he will make Mr. Harding give me some money to buy a new one. I am the worst-dressed girl in the school, Miss Amelia, and you know it.”

Without waiting for a reply, Stasie flung out of the room, and descended the stairs rapidly.

In truth her toilette needed renewal. The black cashmere had grown nearly brown ; marks of unpicked stitching showed visibly where alterations and revivifications had taken place ; the edges of the cuffs were frayed ; the white frill round her throat, though not soiled, was crumpled ; and her fair hair was rough and untidy. Nevertheless, with the light of suddenly-awakened life and hope sparkling in her eyes, glowing on her cheek, and dimpling round a mouth which could be sweet, scornful, or sad, as the spirit

moved her, she was as pleasant an object as the eye could rest upon. Without fear or hesitation she opened the door, and entered the room swiftly, joyously, ready to welcome as a second father the man who awaited her, and whom she expected to find less aged, less decrepit indeed, than his brother, but gray, perhaps bent, and almost venerable, ready to pet and indulge her.

A figure was standing on the hearthrug which made a step forward to meet her, so different from her fancy's sketch that she stopped short and forgot to accept the hand he held out. A man of middle stature, slight, and not ungraceful, though rather high shouldered, well and carefully dressed in the newest possible clothes, with small fine brown hands peeping out of large snowy shirt cuffs ; a pair of soft lustrous eyes, that seemed to Stasie of unfathomable depth and darkness ; a lofty but rather narrow forehead ; thick glossy black hair, beard, and moustaches ; and a smooth, sallow, dusky complexion, were the items which she chiefly remarked.

"And is it possible you are little Stasie whom I remember playing in the court of the Consulate with her gazelle," he exclaimed in perfectly good

English, although his accent was slightly foreign, and his voice, though carefully subdued, had in it something harsh and strident. Stasie recovered herself and gave him her hand with a frank smile.

“I suppose I am the same Stasie ; but I cannot remember *you* at Mardīn.”

“Can you remember *anything* of Mardīn ?”

“Oh yes, much, only it seems all like a dream ; but *you* I do not remember,” and she looked straight into his eyes as she spoke, then, with a slight blush, she withdrew her hand, and sat down on the sofa.

Kharapet drew a chair near, and there was a slightly awkward pause, during which, though Stasie did not look up, she felt that his deep eyes were fixed upon her.

“I did not expect you quite so soon,” she said, still feeling ill at ease.

“You expected me, then ? I have been five—six days in London, and it seemed long, very long, until I could come and see my poor brother’s beloved Stasie. I little thought what I should find.” These last words were murmured in a caressing voice, conveying such subtle delightful

flattery that Stasie's heart beat quick with gratified vanity. "Are we not somehow related?" he continued; "ought I not to hold the place of your uncle and protector as well as executor to my brother's last testament?"

"I am sure," replied Stasie cordially, "I should be very thankful to have any relative that would be kind and take an interest in me, for I seem to have lost every one when dear Papa Kharapet was taken away,"—her voice broke a little,—“but I can hardly fancy you are his brother, you are so much younger.”

"I am his half-brother, and considerably his junior, yet old compared to you, Stasie. I suppose I may call you Stasie? though you are such a grand young lady—so tall, so fair!"

"Of course you may," she said with a pleased laugh, amused by his tone of deference; "I do hope you will be my friend, I want so many things. Mr. Harding is very kind, but I see him so seldom, and he is always in such a hurry that I can never even ask him."

"You must tell me all you want and wish," replied Kharapet, drawing his chair a little nearer. "I had just joined my poor brother, whom *I* also

regarded as a father, when his death occurred ; and I know how tender was his affection for you, how he looked to your return, and longed for your presence even as a dry tree for the gracious rain. I shall best fulfil his wishes (which are most sacred to me) by watching over you, and, so far as I can, furthering your happiness."

"You are very good," murmured Stasie, a little embarrassed ; "and did he—did he die quietly ? without pain ?"

"Quite without pain—quite quietly," returned Kharapet, his deep eyes still fixed upon her with an eager half-surprised look, and there was a pause—Stasie thinking how sad it was to be thus deprived of the only creature to whom she was necessary, but her attention was quickly fascinated by her companion's next words.

"I have only seen my colleague, Mr. Harding, two or three times since I arrived. He is your very good friend, and we hope to arrange your affairs to your satisfaction——"

"Then I do hope you will let me leave school," cried Stasie, interrupting him. "It is quite too shameful to be kept here so long. Do you know I shall be eighteen next month ?"

“Indeed,” he exclaimed, with the air of one suddenly roused to the perception of a great truth. “It is a just cause of complaint that you should still be here, but the person to blame is your guardian. Now that I have come for the sole object of attending to your interests, I shall see Mr. Wyatt frequently, and see also that your wishes are carried out. Mr. Harding is so greatly occupied with the concerns of his business that he does not think how swiftly time rolls on, while your bright youth and beauty are left to the mournful seclusion of a prison like *this*,” and the Syrian glanced indignantly round the neat apartment, its walls decked with washy water-colour drawings, its tables crowded with crotchet mats, wax-flowers, and specimens from Tunbridge, Buxton, and even humbler Margate.

“It is tiresome,” said Stasie, with a swift blush and pleased smile, “but that is all. The Misses Boaden are kind enough, and I do very much what I like, but I am quite too old to be here.”

“Have you formed any plan—any idea of where you would wish to live? In such arrangements I need help, for though I have lived much with Europeans, especially Englishmen, and have

even resided a while in London, I am scarcely fit to advise a young English lady in such a matter. Your own views no doubt will be our best guide. What would you say to residing with Mr. and Mrs. Harding?"

He looked at her keenly as he spoke, averting his eyes as they met hers.

"I do not think I should like it," returned Stasie frankly. "They are kind and nice, and *she* is delightful; yet——" She paused, resuming with more vivacity, "I *should* like to go back to Mrs. Mathews, and you know, as she is a widow and far from rich, it might be a help to her."

"No, no!" cried Kharapet energetically, "that would not do. Orphaned and alone as you are, you require the patronage of the rich—the powerful; if, indeed, Lady Elizabeth would recommend some companion—some protectress. Her Ladyship is most friendly and condescending. I had the honour of dining——"

"I don't want to be patronised and condescended to," interrupted Stasie petulantly; "I want to go where they are fond of me, and where I am at home; or, better still, I want to go abroad. I want to see Rome and Nuremberg and the Tyrol,

—and oh ! heaps of places. Could you manage this for me, Mr.——what ought I to call you ?”

“Hormuz !” said he, in a low hesitating tone “if you will give my name a charm by speaking it !”

Stasie laughed uneasily, half-pleased, half-startled. “Well, then, help me to travel and see new countries, and I will call you what you like.”

“I think I might manage even this for you,” he said thoughtfully, “but not all at once. We shall see. I am not altogether free to act as I should wish, but ——”

“Will you promise me that I shall leave this place within a month from the present time ?” cried Stasie impetuously, and clasping her hands together, she bent forward resting them on her knee.

“I will,” he returned promptly, “only I must try and persuade the head of this establishment to forgive the usual three months’ notice, which is, I am told, necessary.”

“But you, or I can pay all the same,” persisted Stasie.

“It is never right to disregard money or

money's worth," began the Syrian, when Stasie broke in upon him——

"Do tell me, have I much money? Am I well off? or have I only enough to live on by pinching? No one has ever told me anything clearly, and I *never* have enough money."

"I scarcely know if you will be rich," returned Hormuz; "the task of collecting and realising my poor brother's property is tedious and difficult. However, you will at least have enough!"

"Then do tell Mr. Harding to let me have some money! I am going to stay with Mrs. Harding on Friday, and I do so want some new clothes and things."

"Your word is law," said the Syrian. And then the conversation turned on the late Consul—his fond preparations for his beloved step-daughter, and on her misty memories of her Eastern life—her experiences under Mrs. Matthews' care—of the position and prospects of the excellent widow—the number and occupations of her children, etc. etc.—all which particulars the Syrian soon ascertained from Stasie's ready talk. At length Kharapet rose, and making a deep, not ungraceful bow, "I must," he said, "tear myself

from a conversation that will long dwell in my memory ; and you, my fair niece, as I shall consider you—you will be before my eyes until we meet again, which will be, I trust, soon. Meantime you must not suffer any inconvenience I can remove. Allow me to give you, on account of the increased allowance which I shall take care you receive, this small sum for present emergencies,” and taking out his “portemonaie,” he very carefully counted six sovereigns upon the polished walnut table.

Stasie’s eyes sparkled. “Oh ! thank you—thank you ever so much ! You will pay yourself, will you not ? I don’t want presents, you know.”

“Rest content,” he replied, a smile softening his grave eyes, though it could scarce be seen through the thick beard which concealed the lower part of his face. “I have brought you a few mementoes from the sunny land where your childhood was passed, besides some jewels I have kept for you, because I knew such was the destination my brother intended for them. So for the present, farewell, fair lily ; we shall meet at Mrs. Harding’s.”

The instant Stasie heard the front door shut, she darted up-stairs, and found Ella Mathews had finished her letter, and was busily employed renewing the torn hem of a dress.

Stasie, after executing three or four wild pirouettes, sprang into the middle of her bed at a bound and stood upright there.

“What in the world is the matter?” exclaimed Miss Mathews.

“Everything that is delightful,” cried Stasie. “The new executor is a dear, darling duck! He is going to take me out of this horrid den, and let me travel on the Continent; and he has brought me a box full of jewels, and above all, he has given me six gold sovereigns! I don’t think I ever even *saw* so much money all together. What do you think of that, Ella?” descending from her elevation with another bound. “He is *very* handsome, and quite young—that, is rather young; he has *such* lovely eyes, and what is more,” swiftly reinstating her looking-glass on its table, and looking at her own image earnestly, “I fancy he thinks me *very* nice indeed”—a little triumphant nod—“not that he said so absolutely, but I could understand that he was

astonished to find me—well, such a tolerable-looking girl; and yet I was horribly untidy, and my hair all loose. If he takes a fancy to me I shall just make him do what I like. Oh! it is delightful to find some one to think you nice.”

“What a wild thing you are,” said Ella Mathews, laughing; then more seriously, “you must play no heartless tricks, Stasie.” Ella had a very quiet but earnest love affair of her own hidden away till better times would give her and her lover a right to speak of it.

“Nonsense,” cried Stasie. “You are *too* great an owl sometimes; and do, dearest Ella, put away that horrid old frock! You shall buy a new one, for you and I always go shares, don’t we, dear? Let us ask Miss Amelia to come up to Spencer’s to-morrow and buy the stuff.”

Ella shook her head, and a very sweet smile played round her lips. “I can’t take your money, dear Stasie. Mr. Harding would say very sharp things if he heard of such proceedings; and you forget what heaps of ‘wants’ you have yourself. Do not be so generous—I was going to say foolish—only you don’t deserve that from me!”

“You are really an ill-natured cat,” said Stasie very gravely; “you will only put me to the trouble of choosing for you, and I have not such good taste as yours, don’t you see? *This* money is just for my ‘immediate requirements,’ as that nice, dear executor said. When I go to Mrs. Harding I shall make all my big purchases. I am quite sure there is plenty of money for all *I* want, and I shall just tease their lives out till they let me go back to your mother. Oh! Ella, suppose you and I could travel together in Switzerland and Italy, even to Rome!—Rome,” with a little shriek of delight. “Wouldn’t it be too delicious? but we could not manage it alone. Why not take Hormuz Kharapet as a sort of male chaperon—you don’t know how nice he is—I am just longing for you to see him. Only I wish he were not in European clothes. He would be ever so much nicer in a turban and baggy trousers, with a scimitar in his girdle; indeed, I almost wish he were a Mahometan. Of course it is better for himself that he is not, but he would decidedly be nicer and more interesting if he were. Do you know he is exactly what you might imagine Selim to be, or Hafed in the fire-

worshippers ; only it is rather funny to imagine either Selim or Hafed an executor mixed up with lawyers and parchments, and English law courts. Still, *even* as a Christian he is charming—so uncommon—and so polite. Probably he is not accustomed to fair girls, but he is evidently quite taken with me, and I shall do my best to be agreeable to him. I wish I had a nice new dress for Friday ; that is out of the question, but I *will* buy a large tulle cravatte and frills, and new gloves, and shoes, and a sash. I wonder if Hormuz Kharapet will come to the theatre ? He speaks English quite like an Englishman. I do wish you had seen him, Ella !”

Here the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Miss Amelia Boaden, the younger and more energetic of the sisters who ruled Elmwood House. “ Well, my dear Stasie, I should like to hear something of your interview with Mr. —— I did not quite catch his name ; but he told me he is executor to your late excellent stepfather, and I presume *he* is the gentleman whose absence and whose objections so often offered obstacles to a more enlarged system of education for you, my dear ?”

"Yes, Miss Amelia, he *is* the other executor ; but I am sure he would never object to anything right or reasonable."

"That is a good deal to be sure of on the strength of one short interview, my dear," returned Miss Amelia drily. "Come, my sister is in her own room, and would like to hear what you have to say, as I presume your stay with us will now soon be brought to a close."

"I am not at all sure of that, Miss Amelia ; but you must acknowledge that I am old enough and big enough to leave school," said Stasie, as she rose and followed her preceptress out of the room.

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Mr. Harding's residence at York Gate, Regent's Park, was the typical middle-class house of a well-to-do citizen. Everything in it was solid, handsome, and in the most perfect order. The door and bell handles, the name plate, the steps, were in the highest condition of polish and whiteness. Within, the same care and attention were everywhere visible, suggestive of a tight hand. In the rather heavily-furnished drawing-room, however, something of a different and more graceful taste was discernible. Flowers were always judiciously

placed about it ; velvet rugs and silken hangings of Persian manufacture, Oriental china and quaint bronzes, redeemed it from being a stereotyped edition of other rooms.

Here Mrs. Harding's happiest hours were spent in the morning, when she administered simple and very small doses of rudimentary education to her children, and better still in the evening hour, before papa's return from the city, when she answered their many questions and told them stories to their hearts' content.

Could any of Mrs. Harding's acquaintance have looked in at such times, they would scarce have recognised her—bright, animated, playful ; a glimpse might be caught of a nature very different from her ordinary seeming, but she had not many visitors.

When first Stasie knew Mr. and Mrs. Harding, she was charmed with the frank cordiality of his manner and a little chilled by the indifference of hers. This soon wore off, however, and was replaced by sincere liking for the wife, notwithstanding the strong contrast between the eagerness and animation of the one and the stillness of the other.

Here Stasie Verner found her hostess with her

three children when she reached York Gate on the ardently-expected Friday.

"You are later than I expected," said Mrs. Harding, shaking hands with her cordially (they did not kiss on every occasion).

"I came with Ella Mathews, who is going home for a day or two. Her mother sent for her, and I waited to put her into an omnibus before coming on here."

"Were you in charge of her or she of you?" asked Mrs. Harding with a smile.

"Oh, we take charge of each other. I think she is more of a coward than I am. How do you do, Johnnie? Come Ethel—Willie, don't you know me? give me a kiss, you darlings! Willie is looking much better, Mrs. Harding."

"Yes, he is better," returned the mother, pressing the little dark curly head to her side, while Stasie took the fair shy little girl on her knee.

"Did you come in a bus or a cab?" asked Johnnie, a large, bony, red-haired, fiery-tempered boy, some years older than the others, and an ugly likeness of his father.

"You will like to take off your bonnet before

luncheon, Stasie, said Mrs. Harding, and led the way to the rarely-used "spare room."

"How delightful it is to come and stay here," cried Stasie, unable to repress her abounding joyousness. "It is so dull and tiresome at school; your house is charming, and it is so good of you to have me," she continued, throwing her hat and mantle on the bed.

Mrs. Harding smiled. "Most young people would consider this a very dull house," she said, "but nevertheless I think you will enjoy your visit, for I have permission to supply your needs and renovate your wardrobe."

"How delicious!" cried Stasie; "I am sure that is Hormuz Kharapet's doing. How nice and kind he is! Don't you think he is?"

"He is exceedingly ready to oblige you. He has had deep discussions with Mr. Harding as to what you might or might not have. Executors, you know, have but limited powers."

"Well," returned Stasie, "as long as I get what I want, I do not care what their powers may be."

"Mr. Kharapet dines with us to-day," resumed Mrs. Harding; "and after luncheon we must

arrange about our shopping. It is considered right that you should call on Lady Elizabeth Wyatt, and I suppose you would first like to have a new dress."

"I should indeed. Am I not awfully shabby?"

"You might be smarter," said Mrs. Harding, with a smile; "but luncheon is ready and the children ravenous."

Before the mid-day meal was over Kharapet made his appearance, somewhat to Mrs. Harding's surprise.

"Ah! Miss Verner—Stasie," he said, after saluting Mrs. Harding, his large eyes lighting up as they met hers, "I am rejoiced to meet you again. It seems long since my visit to your school, but you will find I have not been idle."

"Thank you," returned Stasie, with a delightful quick blush—she changed colour readily. "I have been thinking of all sorts of things that you can help me in since I saw you."

"Do not make too large demands," said Mrs. Harding, as Kharapet drew a chair to the table and proceeded to attack the good things before him.

He presently asked how Stasie managed to travel from Forest Hill. "I reproach myself for

not going to fetch you. Although I love and honour most things English, yet I would not adopt all its ways—the freedom of your young ladies, for instance.”

“Yet you must be quite familiar with our habits as regards them, you have lived so much with English people,” said Stasie.

“It is true ; nevertheless I observe differences. There are the daughters of my noble friend, Lord Saintsbury ; they never leave the house alone.”

“That is different,” said Mrs. Harding. What do you want, Johnnie ?—wine ? Oh no, toast and water is much better for little boys. That is quite different ; the Ladies Lumley are wealthy aristocrats, and can always command caretakers. We are but respectable bourgeois.”

“I wish I were an aristocrat,” sighed Stasie, who was busy mashing up some strawberries with cream for Willie.

“Why ?” asked Mrs. Harding ; “are you not happy and well off as you are ?”

“Oh, I can scarce say why ; but I imagine there is something refined about their life—a something chivalrous about the men, even when they run wild and do not pay their debts.”

“A school-girl’s idea, dear!”

“Perhaps so. Still I am happy enough—or I intend to be, with your good help.” A sweet, frank smile, and a little confidential nod to the Syrian, which he received with a flash of delight beaming over his face, but immediately suppressed.

“We cannot get a box before next Thursday, to see Jeafferson in *Rip van Winkle*,” resumed Mrs. Harding. “Will you come with us, Mr. Kharapet?”

“I regret I cannot. I am engaged to my good patron to arrange a meeting in support of the ‘Church Assimilation Society for drawing nearer the Nestorian and English Churches.’”

“Can there be much in common between Protestantism and Eastern Christianity?” asked Mrs. Harding, as she adjusted a napkin round Willie’s neck. “Confess, Mr. Kharapet, you have the Oriental indifference to dramatic displays, unless, indeed, for ballets, and would rather be excused coming with us.”

“You are wrong, indeed you are wrong,” he exclaimed. “It is always a pleasure to be with you and my fair niece; but on the present occa-

sion the matter in hand is so important that I must exercise self-denial."

Mrs. Harding smiled; and Stasie, whose interest had been aroused by his words, exclaimed, "How do you mean, about drawing the Nestorian Church nearer to ours, Mr.—Mr. Kharapet." She hesitated a little how to call him.

"Why address me so formally?" he said insinuatingly; "surely you and I—so nearly related, I may say—can call each other by our Christian names? Shall we not, Mrs. Harding?"

"You are not related," replied Mrs. Harding with the gentle indifference which generally characterised her manner, "but I see no objection to your using your Christian names."

"And mine will acquire beauty and music if *you* use it," said Kharapet to Stasie, with a courteous bow.

"I am glad to bestow such favours so cheaply," said Stasie laughing, yet blushing too. "Now, Hormuz, pray tell me how you are to assimilate our respective Churches?"

Whereupon the Syrian entered into a long explanation of the original simplicity and purity of the Nestorian creed, and of its points of re-

semblance to Protestantism, with an exposition of the advantage to Christianity in general if it could be affiliated to the Church of England. His words flowed with wonderful ease, and surprisingly few grammatical errors. His manner, too, was gentle and graceful, and though his voice was naturally harsh, its tones were most carefully subdued to persuasiveness. Nevertheless, he did not succeed in making his subject very clear to his hearers, which Stasie accounted for by her own ignorance and dulness. At any rate the exposition carried them to the end of luncheon, when the children, feeling the renewed strength which comes from eating, grew restless and audacious.

“May I get down, mamma?” asked Ethel.

“Stay, dear, you must say grace, and then look at that picture-book on the chair till nurse comes.”

“Thank God for a good dinner may I get down now?” said Ethel, all in a breath. Johnnie, without asking any permission, slipped from his seat, and was quickly at Kharapet’s side. “Now,” he said, “will you give me some of those sweeties you said you would bring?”

“My dear Johnnie!” remonstrated his mother.

“He told me he would!” insisted Johnnie.

“And here they are,” said Kharapet good-humouredly, as the little ones crowded round him. “This is better than Rahat Lakaum. This is Mardīn sweetie, with a flavour of pomegranate. I had it straight from Baghdad. You ought to ask papa to get some home for you by one of his ships. It is perfectly pure and wholesome, Mrs. Harding—no bad London mixtures! Ah! Stasie, you have eaten plenty of this at Mardīn, I dare say?”

“Give me a little,” said Stasie, laughing, and stretching out her hand. “I fancy I remember it.”

No sooner had she closed her white teeth upon it than she gave a little nod, and as soon as she had disposed of the morsel she exclaimed, “Oh, yes! I remember this well!—the sweet, delicious scented taste! It seems to bring back a courtyard, with such a glare on one side of it, and a surly old camel kneeling in a corner in the shadow. And wasn’t there a camel-driver—very, very brown and very gaunt?”

“Yes, yes; that was the Mardīn Consulate,”

said Kharapet, rubbing his hands softly over each other, and looking keenly, hungrily at her. "I did not think you would remember even so much of your early home; I feared you had quite forgotten."

"I often think of it," returned Stasie dreamily, "and fancy I remember it; but how much is memory and how much imagination I cannot tell. Do give me a little more of that—what do you call it?—Hormuz—" a little coquettish pause before the name.

"Helwa," he returned. "It is a great favourite in the Turkish harems."

"Don't give it all to Stasie Verner," cried Johnnie. "She is big—she can have what she likes; but I never get no sweeties!"

"Have mine, Stasie dear," said Willie, trying to climb on her knee, and taking a piece half sucked from his rosy mouth.

"Oh, Willie!" cried his mother, laughing, "that is very ill-bred."

"He is a dear, kind little fellow," said Stasie stroking his head. "Eat it up yourself, Willie."

"Now, Stasie, if you have quite finished, we had better go out," said Mrs. Harding. "As I

have nearly *carte blanche* from the powers that be in the matter of dress for you, we shall have plenty to do."

"How delightful!" cried Stasie. "I have to thank *you* for this," holding out her hand to Kharapet, who took it almost timidly. "I shall never be able to remember all I want," she continued. "May I come into your room and write a list while you dress, Mrs. Harding? You can help me."

"Yes, certainly."

"May I be permitted to accompany you?" asked Hormuz.

Mrs. Harding smiled. "I think," she said, "we can do our shopping best alone; but I shall be happy to set you down anywhere."

Without waiting for a reply she walked away upstairs. Stasie followed her, thinking, she did not know why, that Mrs. Harding was not quite friendly to Hormuz Kharapet.



CHAPTER III.

THIS visit to Mrs. Harding produced an intoxicating effect upon Stasie. She suddenly found herself the pet of the house. Mr. Harding chose tit-bits for her at dinner, and told her his choicest stories, besides paying her very broad compliments, and encouraging his favourite, the eldest boy, to climb on her back and pull down her hair.

Kharapet was constantly at the house. He said little, but brought her offerings of sweetmeats, and gazed at her with an air of wondering adoration, calculated to create in her a high estimate of her own powers of fascination, while Mrs. Harding, though never demonstrative, managed to impress upon Stasie the pleasant feeling that with her also she was a favoured guest.

The days which intervened before the vividly

anticipated evening at the theatre were delightfully occupied with shopping and dressmakers, and so passed quickly.

Mr. Harding had agreed to dine out, to avoid an early repast and a lonely evening at home; and as soon as the lady of the house and her guest had departed, the neat parlour-maid cleared away the dinner things, observing to the housemaid, who was trimming a cap in the housekeeper's room, "I am sure I wish I knew when master will be in. I do so want to run to Tottenham Court Road before the shops are shut; and it is so seldom one has a chance in this house."

"I'd go if I were you," returned her fellow-servant. "Cook is off already. If master *does* come home before you are back, why, I can answer the bell; he won't heed."

"It's easy to see you are new to the place," said the parlour-maid, with a shake of the head, as she screwed down the tablecloth press. "I believe master would know from outside the door if the wrong servant came half way up the kitchen stair to open it! I never see his like—never! Sometimes I think I'd give a good deal

if I might slap his face, he is that aggravating, and other times I think he isn't half bad; anyways I'm glad I am not his wife. Law, Sarah! what missus has to put up with!"

"I begin to think so," returned Sarah. "It must be hard for her. Thank the Lord, Jane, you and I can give warning, and leave at the end of the month."

"So we can. Still if I were missus I think I could manage him. She answers soft and reasonable and respectful, always treating him as if he was a gentleman when he is in his tantrums; if she'd just shy a soup-plate full of hot soup at his head, that's the sort of explanation *he* would understand. He knows no *man* would put up with his nonsense, and that's the reason he keeps only women servants. I am sure he is rich enough: still he is not so bad to us, but I can't abide him when he is on the rampage."

"It's not a bad place, after all," said the housemaid; "five servants and a man to clean the boots and windows. There are many worse."

"A fair table and meals regular," chimed in the parlour-maid. "I think I'll venture to go, Sarah. He won't come home when there's no

one here to cosset him. At any rate he will not want dinner, and you'll not mind opening the door to him?"

"Not I," returned Sarah, who was of a less imaginative sensitive nature than Jane, the parlour-maid. "He can't eat me, and if he does, I'll make it uncomfortable for him. Will you buy me two yards of blue sarsnet ribbon while you are out, like a good girl, and a reel of black cotton?"

Jane accepted the commission, and ascended to her room to adorn; hardly had she accomplished half her toilette when an angry peal of the front-door bell made the stout-hearted Sarah jump. Throwing down her work she went quickly to answer it.

Mr. Harding was standing outside regarding the door with an angry suspicious stare—a man above middle height, broadly and powerfully built, with a strong handsome face, sandy hair, light eyes, thick red whiskers and moustaches. He was remarkably well dressed, and though not looking quite the conventional gentleman, had not the slightest tinge of vulgarity in his aspect.

"Where's Jane? and why the devil do *you*

open the door?" were his first words, as he crossed the threshold and handed his hat to Sarah.

"Please, sir, she has just gone to her room, and I thought it was better to open the door at once than to keep you waiting till she came down," she returned with perfect civility and composure.

"Send her to me at once," said Mr. Harding sternly, as he turned into the dining-room and threw himself into a vast luxurious chair, looking round him with an impatient dissatisfied expression, as if seeking whereon to wreak his ill-temper. While he thus sat glowering, Jane, neat, collected, but really nervous, presented herself.

"Oh! you are there, are you?" said Mr. Harding, a little disappointed at not finding her "absent without leave."

"Yes, sir."

"Ah—hum! how long is it since your mistress left?"

"Nearly an hour, sir."

"Ha! they are half melted by this time, and serve them right, for spending their time and

money on such balderdash. Tell cook to send me some dinner—I am famished.”

“Dinner, sir!” echoed Jane, dismayed. “Have you not dined?”

“No. Oh, you thought you had got rid of me, did you? You are just mistaken. Go and get me some dinner, but first I will take some brandy and seltzer.”

Jane went quickly in search of the desired beverage, and seized the opportunity of exclaiming, “Law! Sarah, he wants his dinner, and cook out. Can you cook a bit? *I* never even peeled a potato. Isn’t it aggravating.”

“*I can* do a chop,” returned Sarah in some trepidation, “but he is that particular. I’d rather not.”

“Bless us and save us! there’s the bell again, and I haven’t an inch of ice left; the boy promised to bring a pound more, and he hasn’t come!” She snatched up the tray, and went off quickly.

“Well,” cried her irate master, “what has cook for me?”

“There’s some lamb as was left from dinner, sir, and a piece of salmon that was put by for supper in case missus wanted any ——”

“Half-cold leavings!” ejaculated Mr. Harding with contempt. “This is a nice home for a man to come to. By heaven, it’s too bad! Go—get me a steak, and tell cook to make me a savoury omelette. Look sharp now; what are you staring at?”

“I’m afraid, sir, there are no eggs in the house,” said Jane, appalled by the imminence of the danger.

“No eggs! Are there no eggs at the butterman’s or the milk shop, or, where the deuce do you get them? Look here—something has gone wrong, I know it by your hang-dog look. What the ——! By gad—the cook’s *out*—that’s the secret, is it? Now, don’t tell me lies! By heaven, I’ll go search the house for her!”

“Yes, sir, cook *is* out,” replied Jane, with the courage of despair. “Missus said you were not dining at home, and cook thought she might run out for half an hour to buy some things she wanted, so ——”

“Did your mistress give her leave?” in a tone of suppressed fury.

“No, sir, missus didn’t. Cook never asked,” said the girl hastily, as if eager to screen her mistress.

“A pretty state of discipline, by George! Look here—what’s to be done about my dinner?”

“Please, sir, Sarah can cook a steak, but I think there is some cold roast beef, *quite* cold, and ——”

“Better not venture on Sarah’s cooking, eh!” said Mr. Harding gloomily. “There, bring me something to eat—dinner is out of the question. It is too bad after working hard all day to come back to the discomfort and neglect of a house like this. Go, make haste.” Jane gladly escaped to seek eagerly in the larder for what dainties she could find, and proceeded to set forth the cold viands to the best advantage, striving to soothe the family juggernaut with cunningly-mixed salad dressing, and to propitiate him with pickles.

Mr. Harding was really hungry, and so relishing the simple fare provided, grew more genial and disposed to talk.

“I suppose the children are all in bed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hum! not a soul to speak to. What time did Mrs. Harding set out?”

“About half past seven, I think, sir.”

“Ha! I’d bet a fiver she gave that cook leave to go out.”

“I am sure not, sir.”

“How the deuce do you know? and why are you trying to bamboozle me? It’s not to be done, Jane, I can tell you. Did Mr. Kharapet go with Mrs. Harding?”

“No, sir; he went out with them after luncheon, but did not return.”

“Ah! catch him stifling himself at a theatre! There, you may take away, Jane, and feel in the left pocket of my dust coat for a newspaper. Then draw up that blind, put the brandy and seltzer on the little table near my chair.” So saying, Mr. Harding established himself in much comfort, and proceeded to peruse the city article carefully.

He had begun to nod over his studies, however, and was fast dropping into a sound sleep when Jane reappeared with a countenance considerably lightened, and announced “Mr. Kharapet.”

“He has something to divert him now,” she said to her companion, “and we may have half an hour’s peace.”

Mr. Harding started up to receive his guest with alacrity. "Come along, Kharapet," he said. "I thought you might look in as you did not turn up at the office to-day. What will you take? Sit down, sit down."

"I thank you," returned Kharapet blandly, as he advanced to the seat pointed out. "No, I was unable to go into the city to-day, and had an appointment with my Lord Saintsbury this evening."

"Have you dined?"

"I have; but I shall feel obliged for a little lemonade or cold water."

"Ah! you Eastern fellows have the pull over us in the matter of drink," said Harding, as he rang the bell and ordered the desired refreshment. "Why, you must save pounds a year! Now I can't do without my glass of wine, or spirits and water."

"It is habit, and the difference of climate," returned Kharapet mechanically; and there was a pause—each waited for the other to begin. Mr. Harding lit a cigar, and offered one to his companion, who declined.

"Those Moreira shares are still rising," ob-

served Harding at length. "I told you they would."

"So I see; yet you must have a care. They will come down with a run before many days are over."

"I'll venture to hold on a bit longer," rejoined Harding. "I am sure I can rely on you for friendly action."

"So far as I can with safety to myself assist you, I will," said the Syrian cautiously; "but you must be prudent."

And without discussing the matter, whatever it might be, in which both were interested, they glided into talk of their past experiences and mutual transactions in Bombay—none of which concern the present story. They had evidently known each other well in the lifetime of the older Kharapet.

Sometimes their reminiscences were of a kind that would not look well on these pages, and occasionally they lapsed into Arabic, with which Mr. Harding was tolerably familiar. He laughed more than once, long and loud, but his companion found sufficient vent for his mirth in pressing his slender hands together, and chuckling in a low inward manner.

Jane came, lit the gas, and drew down the blinds without interrupting their conversation, and its drift had again changed to the present.

"I suppose those women will soon come back from that tomfoolery. I suspect that's what's keeping you, Kharapet, eh?"

"I *should* like to see Mrs. Harding and her young charge," said Kharapet demurely. "And speaking of her reminds me to warn you afresh against staying too long on those Moreira shares. I have no objection to your making a fair profit on the transaction, but Stasie's interest must be cared for before everything."

"Who is going to injure it?" asked Mr. Harding gruffly.

"I do not suppose you will intentionally, but you are running a risk; and if you hold on too long, and lose *her* money, I must see that you refund it."

"You have turned suddenly conscientious," replied Harding, with a sneer. "You usedn't to be so strait-laced."

The Syrian smiled a triumphant smile that showed all his white teeth and glittered in his black eyes. "Good and faithful friend," he said,

“Stasie Verner’s interests and mine are or will be the same. Know, O excellent Harding, that I love that beauteous creature, and I will wed her. Am I not the luckiest, happiest man on earth? I came, after many difficulties, as you know, all this weary way determined to marry her, even were her hair red, her eyes green, her form hump-backed! and lo! I find a golden-haired angel, with soft speaking eyes, the grace of a gazelle, lips like a pomegranate, hands white as snow! It is a fore-taste of heaven to feel her velvet touch, and all this will be mine.” Kharapet spoke with a suppressed rapture of anticipation, a sort of tremulous passion, that evidently surprised his hearer, who did not seem too well pleased.

“Why! how the devil do you know she will have you?”

“She *must*,” replied the Syrian, in a low concentrated tone, “I will lay hold upon her and keep her—none shall take her out of my hand—but she will be mine willingly. I see I please her; she gives me kind glances, friendly words; her accent as she says my name is tender, and she has seen none other save me. Nor am I ill-favoured, Mr. Harding.” He glanced round for

a looking-glass, but finding none, continued—"I am still young, and I love her; I hunger and thirst for her presence, yet when she comes it overpowers me—I feel a strange restraint—she has a nameless power which I must conquer."

"Well, you have been going ahead!" exclaimed Harding. "Why, how often have you seen this girl?"

"Times and seasons do not count in such a passion as mine. She has never left my sight."

"And what do you think, my good sir, will the guardian say to your proposal?" interrupted Harding.

"He will not object. I stand well with him. I have obliged him."

"Ah!" cried Harding—a prolonged "Ah!" "If I were to tell him of those little transactions at Bushire,—of that affair with Himnar's people,—I am afraid he might not think you a very desirable husband for his ward."

"My friend," said the Syrian quietly but significantly, "you will do no such thing; we should indeed be foolish to injure each other by any unnecessary revelations of past mistakes and

errors." He looked with unusual steadiness straight into Mr. Harding's eyes as he spoke.

"What do you mean?" returned that gentleman, with some degree of bluster in his tone; but his glance sank even as he spoke, and he resumed, with a little embarrassment, "You never understand a joke, Kharapet. It does not look well when a man is so ready to fancy you are going to split on him."

"Split," repeated Kharapet, as if puzzled. "Oh no. I quite understand what—what you call a joke, when a joke is meant, and I am quite sure, joking apart, that you feel convinced I am a very suitable husband for my brother's heiress."

"Ay, there's the rub! isn't it, Kharapet? To think that your brother's hard-earned money should go to a stranger. Never mind, man; you have a better chance of grabbing it by marriage than by any other way. You used not to be so great a favourite with your late lamented brother,"

The Syrian smiled, not a pleasant smile. "Fortune has compensations for the deserving," he said. "Do I understand that you will offer no obstacle to my hopes?"

"No; that is, I reserve my decision. We will

see how matters go on. There is a good deal to be seen to first—much to be considered,” replied Harding very deliberately.

“We will discuss the question farther,” remarked Kharapet. “I think you will find that our interests are identical, only I would strongly advise you to sell out those shares *at once*, and reinvest the sum originally expended in Government or guaranteed stock without loss of time.”

There was something significant in his tone, and he caressed his silky beard with a gesture usual with him when speaking earnestly. Mr. Harding did not reply, and Kharapet went on—

“It rests with yourself how to dispose of the fruits of your speculation. I should be sorry to do anything unfriendly, but I have duties imposed upon me by the executorship which I must not neglect, and——” he paused.

“Of course, of course,” returned Mr. Harding, rousing himself from a fit of thought; “we are both equally anxious to do the best we can for the girl; an uncommon fine creature she is; if I hadn’t a wife already I would see if I could not cut you out.”

The Syrian's dark eyes lit up for an instant with a fierce glare, like an irritated wild animal. He smiled, however, a rather forced smile, as Harding went on—"But I made a fool of myself long ago, ran my head into the noose for the sake of a pretty face that was all the owner's fortune. In short, I never thought enough of my own interest. Well, Kharapet, come up to the office—let me see—the day after to-morrow ; we will go thoroughly into the accounts, and I'll undertake to satisfy you on all points."

As he uttered these words the two men looked steadily at each other, and there was a short silence.

"I will be with you about two," replied Kharapet, rising to take leave ; but his movement was checked by the sound of a carriage stopping, followed by a peal of the front-door bell.

"Here are the ladies," said Kharapet, making a step towards the door, which was soon thrown open to admit Stasie, who entered slowly, and walked to a chair, where she sat down, without noticing either Mr. Harding or Kharapet.

"Well, Stasie, how are you ?" said Mr. Harding.

“Oh! I beg your pardon,” cried Stasie, starting up and rushing over to shake hands with him. “Do you know I was so absorbed in the play that I still seem to see it and nothing else. Oh, Hormuz, why did you not come? You would have been enchanted! It was not acting—it was nature!—the queer, idle, genial, kindly Rip Van Winkle lived and moved and dawdled before you; and when he came back after his twenty years’ sleep and found himself forgotten—when he waited the hesitating recognition of his daughter—it was too touching!—all the more because of the funny quaintness of the poor old man. I could not help crying. You cried too, didn’t you, dear Mrs. Harding?”

“I am afraid I did. Tears are with me a simple physical weakness,” said Mrs. Harding, a faint colour rising to her cheek.

“A man slept twenty years!” exclaimed Mr. Harding, with great contempt; “and you two go crying over such rubbish as that!—by George, you are only fit for a lunatic asylum!”

Stasie laughed. “Certainly it sounds absurd; but if you only saw it! I am sure you would have felt as we did.”

"I doubt that."

"Well, *you* would, I am sure," turning to Hormuz, who had drawn a chair near, and was gazing at her through his half-closed eyes.

"I would, I would," he exclaimed hastily. "I should have felt as you did."

"Come, it is getting late. Will you take some supper or something, Stasie? though I warn you the cook is out, so I don't know how you are to get anything."

"Is cook out?" said Mrs. Harding nervously.

"Oh, I do not want anything," cried Stasie. "I will go away to bed and dream of Rip Van Winkle. What a wonderful gift to be able to act like that! Good-night, Mr. Harding—good night, Hormuz."

"One moment," said that individual. "Shall you be disengaged to-morrow? I should like to bring you the jewels I took charge of, and a little gift I ventured to add myself."

"Jewels!" said Stasie, pausing on her way to the door. "Oh yes. He may come; may he not, Mrs. Harding?"

"I am not sure we ought to give you the jewels till you are of age, Stasie," said Mr.

Harding, with a good-humoured laugh. "But I am afraid Kharapet is going to give you too much of your own way."

"Ah, he perceives that I am to be trusted," said Stasie, laughing, as she kissed her hand and left them.

It was not, however, till two or three days later that the promised jewels reached Stasie.

"To-morrow," said Kharapet, as he sipped some black coffee after dinner, "to-morrow I shall indeed bring you the long-promised trinkets, dear Stasie! Our good friend Harding has been somewhat over scrupulous. He may be erring on the safe side, but I think he might trust you; *you* would not insist on his replacing what he gave to yourself because the law entitled you to do so when you come of age."

"Of course I should not be so dishonest," cried Stasie; "so be sure you bring me the 'pitty sings,' as Ethel calls them. You know I am coming out in colours on Sunday. I am having *four* new dresses all at once. You will have to pay some terrible bills for me, Mr. Harding."

"Ah, my dear, I will take care you do not go

too far. Mrs. Harding knows the length of your tether."

"We have not even approached its length," she returned. "Pray, Mr. Kharapet, how did your meeting go off to-day?"

"Very successfully. My Lord Saintsbury made a most excellent speech. My own poor efforts, too, were listened to with courtesy, and even considerably applauded."

"It is wonderful how beautifully you speak English," exclaimed Stasie. "Where did you learn it so well?"

"I was early placed in the office of an English merchant in Bombay, and then I had the honour of being secretary and interpreter to Mr. Percy Wyatt during his travels in Persia and Turkish Arabia; besides which I love study."

"Ay, Kharapet is a dab at languages. How many can you manage?"

"Oh, not many languages—a few dialects of Syriac and Hindustani."

"It must be delightful to know a great many languages," said Stasie. "Tell me, what was the meeting about to-day?"

"For promoting the establishment of an

English and Syrian College at Antioch where priests may be trained for the evangelisation of the Nestorian and Chaldean churches."

"And do you get in any money for this scheme?" asked Mr. Harding, with an indescribable accent of contempt and incredulity.

"There are several thousand pounds on our subscription list already, but of course we want a considerable sum."

"I tell you what you'll do," said Mr. Harding, with an odd twinkle in his hard, light eyes. "You start a 'Collegiate Company,' with so many shares, to pay six per cent; offer educational advantages in Hindustani and Eastern dialects cheap to students for the civil or military service. I don't mind promoting it for a consideration. Your religious friends won't object a trifle of filthy lucre in addition to their spiritual gains."

"My good friend Harding, you scoff too much—you do not believe in the disinterested wish to spread the gospel of peace which so many of your noble countrymen cherish." Mr. Harding made a slight gesture expressive of incredulity, and Kharapet continued. "I have forgotten to mention a circumstance which concerns you,

Stasie. At the close of the meeting I was in the committee room, and receiving the kind congratulations of the noble chairman, when one of the attendants approached me with a slip of paper, whereon was written, 'Miss C. Stretton would feel much obliged for a minute's conversation respecting her niece, the late Mrs. Christian Kharapet.' I went as soon as I could to the ante-room, and found a lady, not young but elegant, and well looking, as you English ladies are at almost any age. She asked me many questions, which showed acquaintance with your history, Stasie, and explained that she was the sister of your mother's mother. Do I make it clear?"

"Oh yes! I know her," cried Stasie. "She is my aunt or grand-aunt. She used sometimes to come and see me at Mrs. Mathews', and bring me toffy and things. Once she took me to Madame Tussaud's, but would not go into the chamber of horrors! I should like to see her. She used to cry about my poor mother, and I think she is the only relation I have in the world."

"Just so," returned Kharapet. "It seems she has not long returned from the Continent,

and was not aware of the death of my poor brother. She is very anxious to see you, Stasie ; so I ventured, Mrs. Harding, to say she might call here, as I saw no reason to doubt her identity."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Harding indifferently.

"We had better be cautious," growled Mr. Harding, who had been nodding in his chair, but roused up at the mention of a visit. "She will be some old maid that hasn't a sixpence, and wants to sponge on Stasie. We must be cautious."

"I am sure if she is *I* should not grudge her a little help ; and I suppose I have a right to see my own relations though I am not of age," said Stasie aggressively. Mrs. Harding looked up surprised.

"No one wants to interfere with your rights, my young lady ! but you must be guided by those who are older and wiser than yourself," retorted Harding testily.

"Stasie will always be reasonable ; few young ladies have her sense and high spirit. I am sure, Mr. Harding, you can have no objection to receiving any friend of hers."

Mr. Harding muttered something about "making a fool;" and then started up, exclaiming, "Come along, Kharapet, let us have a smoke in the study. I see, Miss Stasie, you are just as self-willed as the rest of your sex, only you are more likely to get your own way than others."

"I hope so," said Stasie, laughing, as they went out.

"Come up to the drawing-room, dear," said Mrs. Harding, "and play me something. I scarce ever hear a note of music."

"Mine is not worth listening to, I fear," replied Stasie. "I do hope I may get some good lessons now."

"Yes, you ought," rejoined Mrs. Harding, as they mounted the stairs.

Stasie went gladly to the piano, and began her very simple *répertoire*. Soon Kharapet stole in, and, creeping over to the piano, leant upon it in closer neighbourhood to the player than she quite liked. There was something, she knew not what, in his dark eyes and fixed gaze, that made her uncomfortable; and in proportion as he grew more familiar and bolder, she grew shyer and more ill at ease, a transfor-

mation that might well mislead him as well as the onlookers.

It was late before Kharapet took leave, and Mr. Harding had been sound asleep in his chair for nearly an hour.

"Till to-morrow," sighed the Syrian, as he pressed Stasie's hand at parting; adding, with an expressive glance, "I hate the night."

"Oh! I love it; it is so delightful to feel oneself dropping to sleep, and so nice to wake up fresh in the morning, especially here, where there is no horrible bell to rouse one at half-past six. I do not know how I shall bear to go back to school after the delightful time I have had with you, dear Mrs. Harding."

"Trust me. We will arrange matters as you wish," were Kharapet's last words.

When Stasie reached her own room she sat down before the glass, looked long and steadily at herself, and fell into a reverie, or rather a fit of graver thought than was usual with her. First she recognised, with a very exquisite sense of pleasure, that she was more than a good-looking girl, and that Hormuz Kharapet shared that opinion. How good-natured and kind he was to

her ! His extravagant compliments reminded her of the lavish praises of her stepfather during his last visit to London, which was her only clear recollection of him. "It is their Eastern way, I suppose," she thought, "and I daresay Hormuz likes me too for his brother's sake. He treats me rather as a child ! I daresay I seem so to him ! I wonder shall I ever have any romance in my life ! I hope so ; but I hope too I am not a coquette by nature," she mused, for she warmly admired earnestness, constancy, loyalty, although a keener sense of fun than generally falls to the share of romantic young ladies often induced her to act flightily. So the Kharapet episode was dismissed from her mind for the present, with a brief resolution to make him talk rationally on some other subject than her own charms and perfections, and to ascertain if he knew anything about her old favourites the Rosicrucians. "It is all very nice to be admired," was her concluding reflection on this head, "but one wants variety ! I daresay Hormuz Kharapet was in India during the Mutiny. I wonder if he had any 'hairbreadth escapes.' I will ask him to-morrow. I wonder what the jewels will be like.

It is a shame not to give me the whole of them ! Mr. Harding is very tiresome sometimes. I don't think he has quite so good a temper as I thought he had. Oh, gracious ! it is half-past eleven. I shall not get half sleep enough." And Stasie prepared rapidly for bed.





CHAPTER IV.

THE following day was clear and bright, and promised fair for the flower-show to which Mrs. Harding and Stasie were going. The morning passed delightfully for Stasie. First, two of her new dresses arrived, and stood the test of "trying on" triumphantly. Then Mr. Kharapet was announced, and entered, bearing an inlaid sandalwood box. Mrs. Harding was writing, and Stasie busy dressing a doll for Ethel. The former smiled and held out her hand without rising, but Stasie came forward.

"Ah, Hormuz! you have kept your word, I see."

"I always try to do so. Here are a few of the more trifling articles bequeathed you by my late brother, and here,"—placing the box on the sofa, beside Stasie, and taking a small silken case from his breast pocket,—“this is a trifle from myself. Will you wear it for my sake, Stasie?”

While he spoke he drew out a massive gold bangle and slipped it on her arm.

“Oh, thank you! a thousand thanks! Is it not lovely, Mrs. Harding! Oh, I will always wear it, Hormuz!”

“It is very massive,” said Mrs. Harding, rising and coming over to look at the contents of the box, which Kharapet knelt down to open with a curious rude key. He exhibited a variety of brooches and clasps, four or five bracelets, a turquoise necklace, a few solid clumsy rings, all of rich yellow gold, studded with small rubies, emeralds, carbuncles, cat’s-eyes, and pearls. Many of the stones were uncut, and all looked dull from their opaque setting, but to Stasie’s unaccustomed eyes they seemed magnificent, and Kharapet assured her they were all valuable stones, carefully chosen. Lifting up the tray which contained these treasures, he then displayed another layer, consisting chiefly of gold ornaments, a beautifully chased classic-looking necklace, armlet, brooch, earrings, and clasp for the waist.

“These are far the best,” said Mrs. Harding.

“They are quite lovely!” cried Stasie.

“And have additional value for you,” said the Syrian; “for I find from my poor brother’s memoranda that they were made for your mother, from the pattern of some antique ornaments found at Ctesiphon. I believe she wore them up to the time of her death. My brother loved to see her richly attired.”

Stasie’s eyes filled up at the ideas suggested by his words. She lifted the necklace tenderly, and sat gazing at it, trying to recall her faintly-remembered mother, imagining the golden circlet round her fair throat—for she had been fair, that young mother! How Stasie longed to have her there with her, to protect and be protected!

“And that is all,” said Kharapet, breaking the silence in which Stasie contemplated her new possessions. “There is an emerald necklace with a diamond pendant, some valuable rings, and other articles, which Mr. Harding thinks you had better not have at present.”

“Pray, at what time——” Stasie was beginning, when the door was opened by the smart parlour-maid, who presented a card, saying, “A lady for Miss Verner.”

Stasie glanced at the card. "Miss C. Stretton!" she exclaimed.

"Show her up," said Mrs. Harding.

A tall lady entered—tall, not ungraceful, and much younger looking, Mrs. Harding thought, than she expected. She had good features, and a rather fixed expression of amiability; her hair was parted smoothly, and fell in a couple of curls behind each ear. She wore an abundantly-trimmed pale lavender dress, and a black silk mantle much befringed, neither looking very fresh. Her bonnet was a little top-heavy, with black lace and poppies; a veil and long lace lappets adding to her incumbrances.

She made an elegant curtsey on entering, and then approaching Stasie with a little run, exclaimed, "Ah! my dear niece, I should have known you anywhere from your likeness to your dear mother! We were like sisters; for, though her aunt, there was a very little difference in our years!" Here Miss Stretton kissed Stasie, pushed her gently away, looked at her, shook her head, and wiped her eyes. "How the past comes back in gazing on you, dear child!"

"I am very glad to see you," said Stasie,

blushing, and feeling a little awkward. Kharapet had quietly thrown a large silk pocket-handkerchief over the trinkets that lay spread out on the sofa, not, however, before Miss Stretton's quick but unsteady eyes glanced curiously in their direction.

"Mrs. Harding, I presume?" continued Miss Stretton, with a graceful inclination, "*and* Mr. Kharapet. I presume, my dear niece, you have heard of my curious interview with this gentleman." She accepted the seat he offered as she spoke. "It was quite extraordinary,"—addressing Mrs. Harding,—“I have only just returned after an absence of two years on the Continent, and my attention was attracted by the advertisement of a meeting under the patronage of Lord Saintsbury and some of the leading clergy, where Mr. Kharapet, of Mardin, Syria, was to deliver an address. Thinking it was your excellent stepfather, Stasie, I determined to attend. You may imagine my surprise when *this* Mr. Kharapet came forward. I at once made up my mind to ask him for a few words of explanation, which he most courteously accorded, when I learned the sad bereavement you have sustained, my dear

child, in the death of your kind protector. I have lost no time in coming to see if I can be of any use to my dear Anastasia's only girl, though I am sure she is happily placed with you, my dear madam?" she concluded suavely, but interrogatively, for she was not a little desirous of understanding her niece's position.

"You are very good," murmured Mrs. Harding.

"Oh! I am only on a visit here," exclaimed Stasie, who was pleased to see "any one belonging to her," as she phrased it, and beamed accordingly on her visitor. "I am still at school. Is it not a shame, at my age? I am trying to coax Mr. Harding and Mr. Kharapet to take me away, and let me live with Mrs. Mathews."

"Mrs. Mathews, ah!" returned Miss Stretton, compressing her lips and shaking her head, as if she "could a tale unfold;" catching Kharapet's eye he bent his head as if in solemn acquiescence.

"What is the matter with Mrs. Mathews?" asked Stasie, looking from one to the other. "Is she ill?"

"No, no. There is really nothing the matter, my dear. Mrs. Mathews is an excellent woman."

"I hope you will stay to luncheon," said Mrs.

Harding politely. This gave an agreeable turn to the conversation.

Miss Stretton accepted the invitation readily, but declined Stasie's offer to "come up and take off her bonnet."

"In fact, I think it unwise for a lady of my time of life to dispense with the extraneous aid of cap or bonnet," she exclaimed with an amiable simper. "I shall therefore not remove my present head covering."

Luncheon was announced, and the children entering at the same time, a fresh strain of conversation was started, and Miss Stretton went into raptures over the beauty and grace of those "sweet little angels." She was lively and sympathetic in a remarkable degree all luncheon time: she detailed her own later adventures at great length.

"You know, dear Mrs. Harding, I am one of those unhappy creatures, an unprotected female, and unfortunately an unprovided female also, at least to the lady of a merchant-prince like yourself I should seem penniless. Well, through the kind interest of my late father's good friend, the Bishop of Algoa, I was appointed companion and

chaperon to two charming girls of fortune and distinction, with whom I have been travelling through France and Italy for the last two years, the Misses Catchpole. They are the orphan daughters of an eminent shipowner, who left them very well off—in short, wealthy. The appointment was a very good one. We saw something of society, and I flatter myself I was of great use to the dear girls; but young people are apt to be influenced by evil example, and though they have not behaved to me exactly as—well as I should to them were our positions reversed, I shall always take an interest in them. Of course one cannot expect the refinement and high-mindedness of real gentry from these sort of people, ahem!”—clearing her throat as she remembered the bourgeois character of her entertainers—“at the same time I am well aware that the middle class, I mean the *upper* middle class, is quite the bulwark of the nation.”

“Real gratitude is rare in all grades,” said Mrs. Harding, as Miss Stretton paused at the end of this long harangue. “Try another cutlet and a little more hock. The ice to Miss Stretton, Jane.”

"You are very kind. I *will* take another cutlet; they are exceedingly nice. After all, one finds nothing abroad to make up for the comfort and elegancies of an English house."

"You look thoughtful—you do not eat," said the Syrian in a low tone to Stasie. "Has anything distressed you?"

"Who, me? oh, I have eaten very well, and I was only thinking."

"A penny for your thoughts," said Johnnie, who sat at the other side of Stasie.

"Dear little fellow, how clever and original," exclaimed Miss Stretton, who was evidently bent on making herself agreeable. "What do you think she was thinking of?"

"Oh, I am not sure; perhaps of those pretty things I saw Mr. Kharapet putting into a box just as we came down to dinner."

"Or of my dolly; isn't it finished yet?" said little Ethel.

"Were you trying to remember your lesson, Stasie?" suggested Willie. "Johnnie always forgets his."

"A house never can be dull with these treasures in it," cried Miss Stretton. "It is indeed

a treat to a wanderer like myself to get a peep at such an interior. I do not wonder that my dear niece dislikes the idea of quitting it for the monotony of existence at school."

"Oh, I am not going to stay there long, am I, Hormuz? Mr. Kharapet and Mr. Harding are to arrange some other residence for me."

"Ah, indeed, and soon?"

"As soon as circumstances permit," returned Mrs. Harding. "It is not easy to find a suitable home for a young lady, even though the world's before her where to choose?"

"Ah! very true, dear Mrs. Harding, very true," said Miss Stretton, with an air of profound conviction. Then turning to Kharapet, who was nearly opposite her, she addressed him with a fascinating smile and slight inclination of the head to one side, "I am sure *you* must feel exhausted; reaction must have set in after the excitement of yesterday. I assure you, Mrs. Harding, Mr. Kharapet's speech excited the greatest enthusiasm. The picture he drew of Eastern life and—and society, expanding under the influence of England, of intercourse with Englishmen, the spread of Evangelical truth

under the glorious sky of Syria, the—the spiritual and temporal benefits which would flow from a union such as he described, was thrilling—touching. I observed several of the gentlemen on the platform were much affected.”

Kharapet accepted the compliment gravely. It was hard, he said, to find language sufficiently forcible and expressive for the magnitude and importance of his subject.

“You managed to find it, nevertheless, my dear sir. And Stasie, he quoted some beautiful little bits of Arabic poetry that sounded quite charming.”

“How thrilling it must be to address a large crowd, and feel that you hold the people spell-bound!” cried Stasie, with an admiring glance at Kharapet. “Were I a man I would rather be an orator than anything; being a woman, I should like to be a great actress!”

“Stasie!” exclaimed Kharapet, with a gesture of horror, quite real.

“Ah, there spoke the innocent enthusiasm of youth,” said Miss Stretton.

“Does it frighten you to hear me talk of going on the stage?” cried Stasie mischievously to

Kharapet. "As soon as I am one and twenty I shall make my *début*."

Kharapet smiled, and was about to speak, but checked himself; and Mrs. Harding filled up the pause by advising Miss Stretton to try some cream with her gooseberry tart.

"Are you coming with us to the flower-show?" she then asked Kharapet.

"If you will permit me—yes. When I was in London before I once saw one of those lovely shows, and I know not which were loveliest—the garden or the human flowers."

"Ah, Mr. Kharapet is, I see, an admirer of beauty," said Miss Stretton; "but I suppose our ladies must pale beside the greater loveliness of your Eastern Houris."

Kharapet laughed softly. "We Christians of Syria do not believe in Houris, as you must be aware," he said; "and in beauty, as in most things, England is pre-eminent. Women in the East are, alas! degraded by ignorance—kept like children."

"But do you not consider learning—I should say instruction—waste of time for girls?" said Mrs. Harding quietly. "I think I heard Mr. Harding and yourself come to some such con-

clusion the other day *à propos* of Stasie and school."

"Nay, Mrs. Harding, you unintentionally misrepresent me. I do not think that charming young ladies should be turned into learned professors, and their bright eyes dimmed by overstudy. I should like them to be neither more nor less instructed than my dear niece there," a caressing prolonged glance from under his long lashes at Stasie as he spoke.

"Poor things," returned that young lady, laughing and colouring; "theirs would be but a short measure of learning."

"I don't think there is much good in lessons. I hate going to school," remarked Master Johnnie, who was painfully idle.

"I can read all Andersen's fairy tales," said Willie with some pride.

"Oh, you are a baby!" cried his brother contemptuously.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Stasie, but you had better go and dress; I should like to see the flowers while we can get near them," observed Mrs. Harding.

Stasie rose, looked at Miss Stretton, and hesi-

tated. "May I come with you and assist at your toilette, my dear," she said, in reply to the look. "I delight in seeing nice young creatures well dressed ; and for the daughter of your dear mother my interest is tenfold. Moreover, I am not without taste, I flatter myself. May I come ?"

"Oh, certainly, Miss——"

"Pray call me auntie ; there is something touching in the appellation," interrupted Miss Stretton ; "and I imagine we two are the sole surviving members of a once numerous family ;" she put her handkerchief to her eyes, and Stasie heartily responding to the appeal, exclaimed—"Come then, auntie, and thank you. I am sure some fairy godmother has been in a good humour with me of late to send me a nice auntie and a kind delightful uncle"—a smile and wave of the hand to Kharapet, as she left the room preceded by her new-found relative.

Kharapet, who had risen with the rest, stood an instant silent, his hands pressed over his heart, a look of rapture lighting up his sallow face and deep eyes.

Mrs. Harding smiled as she assisted little Ethel, from her chair, and let her run away after her

brothers. Kharapet caught the slightly cynical expression, and exclaimed, "Ah, madam, I fear I have never succeeded in winning your friendship, highly though I would value it; you do not, I fear, look favourably on the deep, intense affection which woke in my heart almost at the first sight of that sweet but friendless girl. Providence has, I believe, guided my steps to be the fond protector of her and of her property, which will be precious to me because it is hers. Why, my dear Mrs. Harding, does not your husband's trusted friend find favour in your eyes?"

"My favour is of small importance, Mr. Kharapet; and as to Stasie, young ladies with good fortunes seldom lack either friends or lovers. She, however, is fair enough, and I think good enough, to deserve both for herself alone, yet——" she paused.

"Yet," repeated Kharapet, I pray you, continue; you have stopped some word that would enlighten me as to your real views. I do beseech you, speak!"

Mrs. Harding's pale cheek flushed faintly; she hesitated, and then said, "I am very foolish to give an opinion on what does not concern me, and

if Mr. Harding knew it he would scold me ; nevertheless, I will say that I think Stasie would be happier as the wife of an Englishman, and you as the husband of one of your own countrywomen, notwithstanding your admiration for the learning and accomplishments of ours."

"You are wrong, dear lady, you are wrong ; my life's devotion will secure your young friend's happiness, and—you do not for a moment think I would betray a confidential word ?"

"My opinions are of little moment," she replied ; "only I warn you not to be too confident—too secure of success."

She bowed and left the room. Kharapet looked after her, the words "an enemy—an obstacle," forming themselves in his brain.

While Mrs. Harding, slowly mounting the stairs to her dressing-room, murmured to herself, "Betray ! Yes ; in the very first *tête-à-tête* with a full exposition of how I tried to make him understand he was *not* to tell my husband. Shall I always be an outspoken fool ! After all these years of bitter training !"

Meanwhile no misgivings or distrust darkened the joyousness with which Stasie attired herself.

She was greatly attracted by the sympathy her aunt evinced, and the pleasantly-implied admiration of herself and her belongings which that lady contrived not too openly to convey. I will not say much about her toilette, because some, if not all, my young readers might shriek if I described too accurately a blue-and-white French muslin dress, flounced, but not draped, worn over a *crinoline*, with a handsome sash tied behind; a very small bonnet of lace and forget-me-nots resting on her wavy, abundant hair, which was *not* cut in a fringe, but simply parted and smoothed back as well as its rebellious richness would permit; and a black lace mantlet, shrouding, but not hiding, her pliant figure. Stasie, however, was highly pleased with herself and her toilette. Never had she possessed anything half so smart before.

“Very nice, indeed; most becoming,” said Miss Stretton. “I shall really be quite proud of my niece! You will come and see me, dear, will you not? After all, it is pleasanter for near relatives like ourselves to meet uninterrupted by comparative strangers. I have a very humble little lodging, though not ungenteel, in Stafford

Place, Wesbourne Grove, where I shall be happy to receive you ; and it may be a comfort to you to discuss your plans with one who would fain be a second mother to you, my poor lonely child."

"Thank you. How good you are! I will come the day after to-morrow."

"Very well, dear; the day after to-morrow, then. Come early and share my simple fare. A hearty welcome must atone for the absence of luxuries such as you are accustomed to here."

"Oh, I don't care a straw about them. I only care to have just one or two people to love me."

"Ah, my dear Stasie, you will find plenty whose fair seeming may deceive and flatter. Youth, good looks, a fine fortune—these things command success; but I trust the instinct of a noble heart will teach you whom to trust."

"I don't think people are so bad after all, auntie. And have I a fine fortune? How much?"

"My dear, don't you know? *I* haven't an idea! It is a shame to keep you in the dark. You really ought to be informed. You are quite old enough to understand your own position.

Now those beautiful things on the sofa which Mr. Kharapet covered over so carefully as I came in, were they his gifts or your own property?"

"They are mine—some of what were left me by poor Papa Kharapet."

"Why don't you wear some of them to-day? I see you have no jewellery?"

"No, I do not care for it in the morning; and as Mr. Kharapet did not absolutely give me the box, I do not like to send a servant for it."

"I see you are ready. Shall we come downstairs? I must say adieu to Mrs. Harding before I go. You find her a pleasant friend, eh?"

"Oh, she is delightful, and so kind!"

"That's well; and this Mr. Kharapet—*what* a handsome man! He seems quite devoted to you, dear! I could not believe he was brother to your good stepfather. Why, he is young enough to have been his son! Ah, my dear Stasie, what a sacrifice your precious mother made for you in marrying that poor old Turk! I mean, not a Turk exactly—*that* would have

been too improper. I am sure you ought to love any one belonging to her after all she went through for your sake ; but she has had her reward. Let us go down, dear. Trust me. I shall never rest until I find out *all* about everything, and let you know."





CHAPTER V.

THE flower-show was very brilliant, both as regarded flowers and company. Stasie was exhilarated and excited; the delicious perfume of the trodden grass, the soft rustle and continuous murmur of the well-dressed crowd, the stirring sounds of the Guards' band, made her feel as if suddenly lifted into a region of beauty and elegance worthy the romance in which she always vaguely anticipated one day to play a part.

The fact that a hundred lovely toilettes eclipsed her own caused her no discomfort—she felt so happy, so hopeful, that she could afford to be disinterested.

“Who is that beautiful woman in fawn satin, with poppies in her bonnet, Mrs. Harding?” she asked presently.

“I don't know, Stasie. I know very few

people. Mr. Kharapet can tell us more—he is quite in the gay world.”

“Mr. Kharapet has stopped to talk to a lady. Why, it is Lady Elizabeth Wyatt!”

“Is it?” said Mrs. Harding, turning to look. “I have never met her; she seems most gracious.”

While they looked, Kharapet, who was speaking with an air of the profoundest deference, made a slight wave of his hand in their direction, and Lady Elizabeth walked over to where they stood.

“Allow me to present my good friend, Mrs. Harding, to your ladyship,” said Kharapet with a deep bow. “You are already acquainted with Miss Verner, I believe.”

“Very happy to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Harding,” said Lady Elizabeth politely, but with a slight tinge of patronage. “I have heard Mr. Wyatt speak of your husband as having been most useful to him during his Oriental wanderings. Mr. Wyatt, you know, has made the cause of India and our Eastern fellow-Christians his own. Miss Verner! It is some time since I had the pleasure of seeing you; and really you have grown—grown considerably.

You are quite a young lady. Pray, how old are you ? I presume I may ask ?”

“ Oh yes, Lady Elizabeth. I shall be eighteen next month.”

“ Eighteen ! Why, it is time you should be introduced into society. I am sure your kind friend Mrs. Harding will undertake that task. By the by, I have a *conversazione* on the 20th. I will send you cards. Mr. Kharapet is coming, of course. Mr. Kharapet is quite *l'enfant gaté* of our set just at present ; and I shall have the pleasure of calling on you, Mrs. Harding. Is Miss Verner going to reside with you ?”

“ There is nothing decided as to Miss Verner's future abode,” replied Mrs. Harding. “ Mr. Wyatt's approval is requisite before any final arrangement be made.”

“ Of course, of course ! I assure you, Mr. Wyatt takes a warm interest in his young ward ; but as you can imagine, with such numerous and important claims upon his time he has not much to spare even for those with whom he is personally *Lié*. Shall we move on ? there are some lovely azaleas and pelargoniums in the larger tent. Tell me, my dear Mr. Kharapet, is it true

that you are to be presented to the Prince of Wales on Tuesday? It would be most desirable both as a means of increasing your importance in the estimation of the various meetings which I hear you are to address, and also it will be to the credit of the Prince to interest himself in your project."

With another reverence Kharapet explained that the rumour was quite unfounded,—adding with much humility that he did not look for such distinction.

"But why not, my dear sir? Why not?" returned Lady Elizabeth, who hardly stopped to hear his answer. "Highly esteemed as you are by Mr. Wyatt, and that dear, good Lord Saintsbury! though I regret that my husband and myself do not quite agree with him on the question of this *rapprochement* of the churches. My views are—though I say it myself—wider; and I do not see how any form of Protestantism can suit the climate, soil, and—and—natural productions of the East! You want something gorgeous, glowing, and all that sort of thing. I am for Protestantism '*pure et simple*.' The merest whitewashed barn vivified by the inspired elo-

quence of a preacher! the deep faith of a congregation! *but* in Europe—Northern Europe! Whitewash will never do in the East, will it, Mrs. Harding?"

Mrs. Harding said she supposed not, and Stasie kept her countenance with some difficulty.

"And pray, my dear Miss Verner, have you made great progress at school? Have you any idea of going in for these new examinations? Do you take to music or to art?"

"Neither, I am afraid, Lady Elizabeth. I have not made much progress in anything."

"How is that? You really don't look by any means stupid! You must come to luncheon with me some day, and I shall soon find out what your abilities are in the musical and other lines."

"I am sure you will *very* soon," said Stasie good-humouredly.

Lady Elizabeth had a way of talking herself out of breath, then making a little gasp and rushing on again. She now took up the thread of her discourse by exclaiming: "There is Lady Loftus, one of the most energetic and benevolent women in London. Come, Mr. Kharapet, I must

introduce you to Lady Loftus. *Au revoir*, Mrs. Harding; I will not forget the cards for my conversazione." So saying, she hurried away on Kharapet's arm.

Mrs. Harding and Stasie passed on slowly, enjoying the beauty and fragrance of the flowers.

"I think a back-bone must have been omitted when Mr. Kharapet's mortal frame was put together," said Mrs. Harding with a smile. "I never saw anything like his bows."

"I suppose Eastern politeness is very punctilious," replied Stasie thoughtfully; "but he certainly bows gracefully."

"You think so? I am not a fair judge. I do not like any thing 'Oriental.'"

"I have observed that," returned Stasie; "but why? You give me the idea of being too calm and reasonable for prejudice."

"I wish I were, Stasie; but I am afraid you have not yet had a key to the enigma of my profound character."

"Yet I fancy I know you pretty well, dear Mrs. Harding. Do you think we shall dance at Lady Elizabeth's party?"

"I am afraid not."

“What is the use of giving a party if there is to be no dancing?”

“There are heaps of parties in London where people don’t dance.”

Here some other acquaintances spoke to Mrs. Harding, and they mixed with the crowd.

It was some time before Kharapet joined them, but when he did, there was an air of exultation in his look and bearing, though he tried hard to suppress it.

“I have been detained,” he said to Stasie in a tone of apology, “longer than I expected; but Lady Loftus was pleased to interest herself in my project. And, moreover, she addressed some flattering observations and queries to me respecting yourself. Her words were precious——”

“Oh! what did she say, Hormuz? Do tell me, it is so nice to be praised.”

“She said, ‘Is that Mr. Wyatt’s ward? She is handsome, very handsome, and really looks like a gentlewoman.’ And then she added some words which I will tell you another time, if I may.”

“Ah! that is because they were not pleasant! I do not want to hear any more.”

“I trust you will not think them unpleasant.”

But Stasie’s attention was now attracted in another direction. “Isn’t that waltz delicious?” she exclaimed. “I wish I could dance to it. Do you like dancing, Hormuz?”

“Dancing? no. That is not our taste, and it is one of the few points in which I cannot agree with English ideas. It would be agony to see you whirling round in another man’s arms—agony!”

“What nonsense!” said Stasie, colouring deeply, with an odd sensation of offence, of being revolted. “Why do you say such disagreeable things? If we *should* dance at Lady Elizabeth’s party you will have to undergo a good deal of agony, for I shall dance every time I have a chance!”

“You are a true woman, Stasie—loving power and using it to torture!”

Stasie looked straight into his face with her frank, fearless eyes, and burst into a fit of natural healthy laughter. “Well, Hormuz,” she said, “though you do not like the theatre, you are a good actor!”

“Actor!” repeated Hormuz, puzzled, “Do

you not perceive the difference between reality and acting?"

"Hardly," returned Stasie. "Come, we shall lose Mrs. Harding."

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The next morning brought a total change of weather. Mr. Harding had an engagement at home, and was glad to delay his departure till the rain had somewhat cleared. He was certainly in a bad humour—first evinced by finding fault with his curry, rejecting the toasted bacon, and denouncing the poached eggs. Then Johnnie, who, as having reached years of comparative discretion, breakfasted downstairs, having eaten plentifully, demanded more curry. His mother refused it, whereupon Mr. Harding, with rough impatience, exclaimed, "What bosh! Let the child have enough to eat. *I* don't want to see him skin and bone to suit your refined taste! Here, my boy, pass over your plate." He piled it with rice and curry. "If you can eat that stuff, eat it."

The boy chuckled. "It is very good, papa! quite as good as it was yesterday."

"Well, eat it then, and hold your tongue!"

I am glad it will not all be wasted, as so much is in my house ! Stasie, when you have a husband and a house of your own, I hope you will not let things run to rack and ruin."

"I hope not," said Stasie, with an uneasy glance at Mrs. Harding. "But I am sure I shall never manage better than Mrs. Harding."

The husband laughed a harsh scornful laugh, and took up the paper. There was a few minutes' silence broken by the entrance of the parlour-maid with a note. "For Miss Verner," she said. "A young gentleman left it."

"It is from Ella Mathews," cried Stasie, with much interest, after she had glanced at the contents. "I suppose Bob left it. She wants to see me very much ; she says she has a great deal to tell me. Something has evidently happened ; I must go to-day. There is nothing particular to be done, is there, Mrs. Harding ?"

"I think not," replied that lady.

"You will not go in such weather," said Mr. Harding, looking up from his paper. "And who the deuce is 'Bob' ?"

"Oh ! he is Mrs. Mathews' second son ; the one that is to be a doctor."

"Hum, a medical student! The biggest scamps out."

"I am afraid he is not very steady," said Stasie; "but I believe he is better than he used to be."

"Not a very nice acquaintance for you," growled Mr. Harding.

"Acquaintance!" echoed Stasie, laughing. "Why, he is like a brother to me; not a favourite brother, I confess. You forget that I know no other home than Mrs. Mathews'!"

"The sooner *you* forget it the better," said Mr. Harding, resuming his paper, "or you will find the whole party a millstone round your neck."

"You are not in earnest," cried Stasie, opening her eyes with amazement. "You can't think I could be so worthless!"

Mr. Harding made no reply, and Stasie caught a warning look from Mrs. Harding, which suggested the prudence of dropping the subject. After a few moments' uneasy silence she said, "I promised Ethel and Willie to read to them, as they are not able to go out; I daresay they are waiting for me," and left the room unheeded by her host.

Mr. Harding's tone chafed her beyond what

his words seemed to merit. "Is it possible," she asked herself, as she mounted the stair, that under his good humour and *bonhomie* lurks an ill-tempered brute? that is the reason perhaps that Mrs. Harding is so pale and quiet! Perhaps it is only a passing fit of irritation. Men have a great deal to trouble them out-of-doors. Still, worries or no worries, I am afraid I should have a bitter battle with a husband who spoke to me like that."

Meantime Mr. Harding threw down his paper and drummed for a minute with his large heavy fingers on the table; then, addressing his wife, he burst out—

"You are about as great a blunderer as ever lived, in spite of your education and refinement, and all that bosh!" looking at her while he spoke with fierce anger, which he evidently did not take the trouble to conceal or to control.

"What has been my last blunder?" asked Mrs. Harding, a slight quiver moving her lips.

"Oh! you need not try to bamboozle me; it's not to be done! I can see plain enough you are going against me and Kharapet about that girl, and it's all a—blank—blank nuisance."

“Mr. Kharapet has been complaining of me, I suppose?”

“Not he! he never said anything about it. Don’t you think I can see for myself? Now you had better leave it alone. That fellow Kharapet has taken a mad fancy to the girl, and we had better not interfere with him. I confess I never expected such an upshot; but his position gives him a good deal of power, and he might make things disagreeable for us, and for her too. If I hadn’t put myself out of the running years ago, he shouldn’t have had it all his own way, by Jove! I’d have cut him out. You don’t find a fine girl with a fine fortune every day, and I am pretty sure to have distanced him.”

“It is much to be regretted that you are not free to try your chance,” said his wife in a low voice.

“Well, that can’t be helped now. I know I made a fool of myself, but I would not mind if you would give that care to my comforts and interests I have a right to expect.”

Mrs. Harding folded up her table-napkin in silence; and after finishing the remainder of his cup of tea, Mr. Harding resumed—

“So mind you don’t make a fool of yourself, but back up Kharapet all you can. Try and put that obstinate girl off her whim of going to see those beggarly Mathews people; there is a blank cub of a son there, and they will be trying to snap her up for him. Do you think she has any hankering that way?”

“I know nothing of Stasie’s inclinations. She seems to me too light-hearted—too frank—to be troubled with any sentimental feeling.”

“Hum! women are so infernally cunning. What’s that?” The front-door bell sounded. “I hope it’s not that fellow Kharapet. I don’t want him here philandering every hour of the day; it’s enough to make a dog sick.”

Here the parlour-maid entered with a card. “The gentleman wishes to see you.”

“Oh, Mr. Williams, the solicitor to the Sefton Park Building Company. Have you shown him into the library?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Harding rose, brushed the crumbs from his waistcoat, twirled his moustaches, and walked into the next room, whence Mrs. Harding could hear him exclaim in his heartiest and most cordial

voice, "Williams! very glad to see you, my dear fellow."

Stasie had finished the story she promised to read to her little friends, and was in her own room selecting a suitable present for Ella among the treasures she had received the day before, when Mrs. Harding tapped at the door; there was a suspicious red recently-bathed look about her eyes, which Stasie quickly observed, and drew her own conclusions.

"Oh, Mrs. Harding, which of these brooches do you think Ella would like?"

"I cannot possibly say, dear. I never even saw the young lady."

"Well, which would you like yourself?"

"I do not like either much, though they are valuable; still there is nothing prettier. I am not fond of Eastern jewellery, or anything Eastern indeed."

"Are you not? I have rather romantic ideas of the East; there is something weird and mysterious even in the words Eastern and Oriental."

"Stasie, dear, I wish you would give up this expedition to Islington. It irritates Mr. Harding, and would annoy Mr. Kharapet."

“Mr. Kharapet, indeed,” cried Stasie, putting down the brooches with a slap on the dressing-table. “Tell me, does it vex *you*?”

“Me? no. I am not at all opposed to your going, but I have been sent to dissuade you.”

“I thought so,” said Stasie, sitting down and beginning to put on her boots energetically. “Well, I shall get off as fast as I can. Why should Mr. Harding object to my going to my oldest and, except yourself, my best friends? Does he think he will persuade me to cut them?”

“For one thing, Stasie, it is hardly right that you should go alone all that way.”

“Why not, Mrs. Harding?”—(diving into a bonnet-box and taking out her hat)—“I am sure I have gone often enough from Islington to the Circus, and from Forest Hill home, before Mr. Kharapet came here to make a fuss. I know my way, and I am sure I am quiet enough.”

“Yes, I know you are; but if you wait for a day or two I will go with you myself.”

“No, dear Mrs. Harding, you will not: you wouldn’t be let, I see that; and I should just be drawn on from day to day, and have to go back

to school *without* seeing Mrs. Mathews. I should be angry with you for coming here to prevent my going, only I think I understand——” here Stasie broke off suddenly and kissed Mrs. Harding.

“My husband is right, you *are* obstinate,” said the latter with a smile and slight increase of colour. “Come back as early as you can. Mr. Kharapet dines with us to-day, and you must pacify both gentlemen.”

“I think I shall manage Mr. Kharapet at any rate,” said Stasie, fixing on her hat with some care.

“Take my advice on one point,” resumed Mrs. Harding; “take your gift to Miss Mathews, but say nothing about it; it will save talk and trouble.”

“But why? are not the things my own, and can I not dispose of them as I choose?” cried Stasie, with an angry sparkle in her eyes.

“You are under age, dear, and you have to deal with men who do not understand the joys of *giving*.”

“I am sure Mr. Kharapet does. What a lovely gold bangle he has given me!”

“True, yet——”

“Well, dear Mrs. Harding, I will say nothing now until I have talked more to you; but if there is to be any difficulty about it I will take Mrs. Mathews and Janet a present too. Why, I shall never want half those things.”

“Do not be so hasty: believe me, a woman’s only safe line is craft and conciliation.”

“Oh, Mrs. Harding!” indignantly, “I cannot believe *that*; it is too humiliating. What a horrible idea of life. I may try to be conciliating, but I will never be crafty. Now, will you help me on with my waterproof? Is Mr. Harding in the dining-room?”

“No, he has gone out with a gentleman; so you are quite safe.”

“Safe!” cried Stasie, “I was just going down to ask if he would come with me to find a cab.”

Mrs. Harding stared; Stasie burst out laughing, gave her a hasty kiss, ran downstairs, and soon the sound of the front door closing told that she had left the house.

Mrs. Harding went to the window, and saw the rebel step into a cab. She looked kindly,

sadly, enviously, after the tall slight figure whose springy step bespoke hope and energy.

Then the watcher's misty thoughts rolled slowly away, leaving the background of the past clear and sharp, like a distant landscape in the intervals of sudden showers. Her own quiet happy girlhood in a country vicarage came vividly before her. Its homely pleasures, its poverty and self-denial; its hearty affection and passing quarrels; the first dawn of love for a student cousin, obliterated first by separation, and then by the ardent suit of her husband; the bright hopes, the warm liking and gratitude with which she accepted him; the contentment of her parents, the exultation of her sister at her promising marriage. How vividly it all came back to her! and also the quick, dreadful awakening—the rapidly-growing knowledge that she was wedded to a human animal, to whom she was a mere possession, with whom companionship was impossible, and whom even tolerance could scarce make bearable. In the familiarity of married life it was hard to say which mood was the most repellant—coarse good humour or fierce and brutal anger. But the indissoluble link

was securely forged, and Mrs. Harding knew that in silence and endurance she must wear out her life! Then came the death of an old uncle, from whom her husband, rather than herself, had “great expectations,” and whose will had disappointed them, since which time Harding had shown more and more clearly that he looked upon his marriage as a sad mistake—the fatal result of temporary weakness.

As to her own dear home, how rarely she had been able to visit it! and when she did, the impossibility of speaking frankly, out of the fulness of her heart, respecting her married life, robbed her brief breathing space of its charm and healing. How weary to look back at her ten or eleven years of married life; and if it was less weary to look forward it was because that future had ceased to be hers, and had passed into the possession of her children, therefore a gleam of hope shimmered over the dark cloudy abyss of coming years. Ardently she wished that Stasie’s might be a different fate, and thought with satisfaction of the girl’s brave, if rather impetuous, spirit. “Yet the bravest must give way to the wear of perpetual opposition, continual detraction, if not

strong enough to silence or trample it down, and *I* am so weak !”

No regrets or reminiscences, however, clouded Stasie’s heart as she sped onwards to Islington, rather a sense of pleasant exhilaration at having defied Mr. Harding, in which was quite as much of girlish fun as self-will.

“ Why should I trouble myself too much about Mr. Harding ?” she thought ; “ Hormuz Kharapet will back me up, and I am not doing anything out of the way or unreasonable. I will not let him or any one else frighten me into a nonentity. I am afraid Mr. Harding is not such a good fellow as he seems. If Mrs. Harding was quite happy, would she recommend ‘ craft ’ ? Pooh ! *I* am not obliged to submit to any one.”

.

Mrs. Harding waited with some anxiety for her young *protégée*’s return, and as dinner hour approached, became nervously fearful lest Mr. Harding and Kharapet should arrive before her. To her great relief she was informed that “ Miss Verner had come in and gone to her room at once, just before a peal of the front-door bell announced Mr. Harding’s advent. Kharapet

came with him, and no inquiries were made respecting the rebel.

Although Stasie had carried out her own desire, it struck Mrs. Harding that she looked fatigued and depressed. Nothing, however, was said on that or any other subject of interest until the servants had left the room after dinner, when Mr. Harding, who seemed to have completely regained good humour and placidity, remarked, while filling her glass with claret, "So you have got back safe and sound, Stasie? Did you meet with any adventures?"

"I must entreat you, Stasie," exclaimed Kharapet, who had been remarkably taciturn and grave of aspect during dinner, "not again to go about in this independent manner. It is not meet for a young lady of your or any position to go forth quite alone, especially in a great town. Had Mr. Harding informed me a little earlier of your intention, I should have gone to seek and bring you back. Surely there is a want of delicacy in such daring?"

Stasie flushed crimson. If she loved praise, so she resented blame. "You know nothing about English girls, Mr. Kharapet!" she replied

hastily, "nor English life. I should be sorry to think London was such an uncivilised place that a girl could not go about alone! Why should you and Mr. Harding make a fuss *now*, when all the years of my life before no one ever cared how I came and went? How often have I come here from Forest Hill alone, or the greater part of the way alone, and nobody ran away with me? I should like to see any one try!"

Kharapet looked at her with a curious side-long glance, half admiration, half alarm.

"Ah! you've a spirit of your own, and no mistake; but if I were young and free I think I'd try the running away. I am sure you are well worth the trouble!" cried Mr. Harding.

"I think you are very tired, Stasie," said Mrs. Harding gently; "you look weary."

"No, not tired exactly; but I am a little cast down, for I am going to lose my good friends; Mrs. Mathews is going away."

"How is that?" said Harding rather eagerly, while Kharapet looked up with evident interest.

"Mr. Baldwin—that is the gentleman Ella Mathews is engaged to—has been appointed one of the masters of a big proprietary school or

college at C——, so they are to be married soon ; and Mrs. Mathews is going to give up her house and go to C—— too, where she intends to take boys to board, and they are all in *such* good spirits. I feel a wretch for being sorry ! and yet I *am* very sorry, for they will be lost to me ! Ella will, of course, be taken up with her husband, and I can't say I should like to be in the house with a parcel of boys ! ”

“ Ah ! that's capital for the Mathews family, though,” said Mr. Harding, with an air of satisfaction ; “ the old missionary didn't leave them too well off.”

“ Have you ever seen the *fiancé* ? ” asked Mrs. Harding.

“ Oh yes ! often before I went to school. He was a great friend of Harry Mathews', and used often to come in to tea and supper.”

Kharapet offered a silent thanksgiving that Ella Mathews' “ young man ” did not know of Stasie's fortune, as the Syrian never doubted the result of fuller information.

There was a pause, during which Mr. Harding filled himself a glass of port, and pushed the apricots towards Kharapet. Stasie meantime

coloured, grew paler, and fidgeted with her napkin. At last she broke out, "There is something I want to do so much, if you and Mr. Kharapet will let me ; and I am sure you will, because it is only right !"

Mrs. Harding smiled. "Come, out with it, Stasie, I see you are half afraid of your own proposition."

"That is because I am a goose," she exclaimed ; "I surely have a right to ask for something of my own ?"

"My dear," said Mr. Harding, "you may *ask* anything you like."

"I understand," returned Stasie, with a smile and nod. "Well, you see it will be very costly to poor Mrs. Mathews this moving, though she hopes to get on ever so much better when she is settled ; and then she has to give Bob money, because he is to stay in London."

"And who is 'Bob' ?" asked Kharapet.

"Oh ! the second boy ; he is a medical student. Now, as I lived so long with them, and Mrs. Mathews was quite like a mother to me, I should like to give her a little present—something useful."

“Pray, what do you think of giving,” asked Mr. Harding in a peculiar tone, while Kharapet kept profound silence.

“Well, there is nothing so useful as money, and—and I think a hundred pounds would be a great help.”

Mr. Harding burst into a loud fit of laughter, and Kharapet breathed the words “a hundred pounds! eighty-six Mohammed Shah Kerans,” in an awe-struck tone.

Stasie was dreadfully confused by this way of taking her daring suggestion, but she was true and staunch, and rallied her forces to repeat the attack.

“Do, dear Mr. Harding, tell me how much money I have, and then I shall know what I may give. Surely, if I am well off, and Ella tells me I am, I can spare a hundred pounds?”

“Miss Ella Mathews is a confounded chatter-box,” said Mr. Harding sharply. “I can tell you, Stasie, you are not rich enough to scatter your money about in that fashion, and, by Jove, you shall *not*, while Kharapet and I have hold of it. When you are your own mistress you may make ducks and drakes of it, and you will too if you haven’t the sense to hear reason.”

"But a hundred pounds is not much, and as it is my own money it can only matter to myself. It can make no difference to you! and I shall be so very *very* much obliged to you!"

Mr. Harding laughed again, but less unpleasantly.

"My dear child! you don't know what you are talking about! Why, I dare not give you your own money—I'd have the guardian down upon me! We can do nothing without his consent; and he would think Kharapet and myself off our heads if we proposed such a scheme. It is simply and completely out of the question, aint it, Kharapet?"

"It is so utterly unheard of and foolish, and—and wicked," cried Kharapet, almost stuttering in his eager denunciation of poor Stasie's outrageous idea, "that I doubt if it could have originated with Stasie herself! Confess now that these good people suggested this liberality." He bent his head slightly to one side, pressing his hands together, and looking with a slow insinuating smile into Stasie's eyes.

"They did nothing of the kind," she cried, firing up. "How can you have such mean

thoughts? Mrs. Mathews and Ella are incapable of asking for money—quite as incapable as you are yourself! I wish you would remember the Mathewses are my friends—my best friends—when I had no one else to care for me.”

“A care that was always well paid for,” put in Mr. Harding.

“And what is the use of having money if I cannot help them,” continued Stasie, flashing just one angry contemptuous glance by way of answer at Mr. Harding.

“You will find the use of it all in good time,” he returned coolly; “but for the present what you want is out of the question, and there is an end of it.”

“Do you not think that if it were possible I should not try to meet your wishes?” said Kharapet soothingly.

Stasie was silent. In fact, anger and disappointment were almost too much for her. She felt the hot tears ready to fall, but fearing the species of contemptuous indulgence with which they would be received, she mastered her emotion by a stout effort.

“If it cannot be, why, I must say no more,”

said she, at last, with downcast eyes, crimson cheeks, and throbbing breast, and kept profound silence till Mrs. Harding made a move to leave the room, when she escaped to her own, and enjoyed the luxury of a good cry, calling Mr. Harding by some very bad names in her heart.





CHAPTER VI.

LADY ELIZABETH WYATT's house in C—— Street, Mayfair, was old-fashioned and roomy, but not imposing, its furniture and decorations by no means costly or elegant; yet her rooms looked like the dwelling of a gentlewoman, and had a character of their own, from the number of curiosities and specimens of various arts and manufactures profusely scattered about. The aspect of the company was equally cosmopolitan, for Mr. Percy Wyatt was exceedingly liberal, both politically and socially, and all sorts and conditions, both of men and women, were wont to assemble at Lady Elizabeth's conversaziones. To Stasie, however, all seemed very grand and a little alarming. The staircase was bordered with flowering shrubs, and crowded with gaily-dressed people. It was some time before Mrs. Harding and her young friend could effect an entrance into the

room where Lady Elizabeth stood to receive her guests. Kharapet, who of course accompanied them, was of little use in a crowd of this or of any description. He was disposed to yield to pressure, to bow and back, and make way for every one, and it was by her own exertions and quiet perseverance that Mrs. Harding at last reached the lady of the house.

“ Ah ! Mrs. Harding—Miss Verner ! very glad to see you. Are you not late ? and where is Mr. Harding ? ”

“ He rarely goes out of an evening, Lady Elizabeth, and we have been some time making our way so far.”

“ No doubt ; we are rather crowded to-night. Have you had tea ? Mr. Kharapet, the Duchess of Pembroke desired me to present you to her ; she heard you speak at Lord Saintsbury’s meeting, and was quite pleased : she is in the next room. Mrs. Harding, we must find a seat for you, or would you like to look at some very curious specimens of Lapland work with fish-bones and dried sea-weed ? They were presented to Mr. Wyatt by those most interesting people who were here last autumn. Mr. Metcalf,” to a pale, slim,

typical evening-party young man, "Mr. Metcalf—Mrs. Harding—Miss Verner; pray take these ladies to see the Lapland work, and those new photographs. I congratulate you on your dress, Miss Verner,"—coolly viewing her through her eye-glass; "it is in good taste; you are looking very nice—really *very* nice!"

"Thank you," said Stasie, laughing.

"Come, Mr. Kharapet," continued her ladyship, "the Duchess will be going immediately, she only looked in *en route* to the Princess's concert;" and Kharapet, bowing profoundly, followed her with a bland and beatific expression of countenance.

"If you will take care of Miss Verner I will follow you," said Mrs. Harding, as the pale young man hesitated how to divide himself, and they proceeded slowly in the opposite direction to that in which Lady Elizabeth had carried off Kharapet.

The loud buzz of conversation, the warm perfumed atmosphere, the multitude of strange faces, produced a bewildering effect upon Stasie; she fancied every other person against whom they brushed must be a celebrity, and she burned to know who was who, but hesitated to ask her

cavalier, to whom she felt by no means attracted. Meantime, he seemed somewhat at a loss for conversation. He asked if she had heard Trebelli in *Lucrezia*, or Giulini in *Martha*? or if she had attended any of Dickens's readings? to all of which Stasie replied in the negative, whereupon a pause ensued, broken at length by Mr. Metcalf remarking languidly, "Wonderful woman, Lady Elizabeth! she collects the largest amount of curiosities, animate and inanimate, to be met with anywhere."

"Yes, I should like to know who they are," said Stasie eagerly. "I have never been here before. Do tell me who some of them are?"

"I do not know the half of them; but there, that lady with the trowsled hair and a red velvet bodice is Miss Malcolm, the famous women's rights woman, and the bald man in spectacles is the celebrated Tomkins, the philanthropist," etc. etc.; and he continued to pour forth a large amount of information which yet did not greatly enlighten his hearer, who felt a not unusual degree of disappointment at the aspect of the various "famous" and "renowned" individuals pointed out.

"But are there no other really remarkable

people here?" said Stasie at length, after they had inspected some queer, dingy-looking, oddly-shaped garments, covered with a kind of entangled pattern.

"I should like to see some of the great writers or artists, or Lord Lytton or Millais, or Jeafferson the actor. Oh, I *should* like to see him—shouldn't you, Mrs. Harding?"

But Mrs. Harding had turned to speak to an acquaintance and did not hear.

"I don't think you meet so many literary and artistic people here as you do travellers and distinguished foreigners, and—and starters of new movements and all that sort of thing," returned the pale young man vaguely. "Here is a seat Miss—a—two seats, and I am afraid I must wish you good-evening; I am going on to Mrs. Parkins de Parkyns's dance. Know the de Parkynses? Charming people—enormously rich—sorry I am engaged—a—good-evening."

Stasie sat down, feeling a little desolate for the moment.

Mrs. Harding seemed absorbed in her conversation with a white-haired, dignified, clerical-looking old gentleman, and for the moment oblivious of her charge.

Looking round for some object of interest, Stasie's attention was arrested by a gentleman near the door, who was speaking to a fat old lady in a towering head-dress of lace and feathers.

A tall gentleman—tall and large framed, though spare. A well-shaped head, short wavy, almost black hair, a dark complexion, a firm chin clean shaved, long moustaches, heavy eyebrows, and somewhat sunken temples. These do not sound like the items of a handsome whole, nor was the object of Stasie's notice a handsome man, yet he interested her more than any of the celebrities who had been pointed out.

There was a composed steadfastness in his look—an air of repose in his attitude that pleased Stasie's rather vivid fancy; and she amused herself by imagining to what class of celebrity this tall gentleman might belong. He was not a poet, she felt sure; there was nothing at all dreamy in his aspect. If a *littérateur*, he must be a historian, an essayist, or a political economist; perhaps he was an explorer of strange lands, or a "war correspondent." Yes! the last fitted him best. He had quite a soldierly look and bearing. Perhaps he *was* a soldier, and had

been in a dozen fights during the Indian Mutiny. She wished she had noticed him in time to ask Mr. Metcalf who he was. Then she began to think how different his swarthinness was to that of Kharapet; though nearly as dark, his darkness was distinctly European. "I wonder what his eyes are like," thought Stasie lazily. She was beginning to feel bored by sitting there silent and unnoticed.

Even as she thought, the unknown, who had been listening courteously to the fat lady's eager talk, looked round as if a little weary. His eyes met Stasie's, and dwelt upon her with quiet scrutiny—a scrutiny that did not in the least embarrass or disturb her; but his eyes were disappointing, of no particular colour, rather deeply set, and decidedly too light for his general complexion.

She looked calmly at the stranger with an odd feeling of fascination, which yet seemed natural and in no way oppressive. This encounter of glances lasted perhaps a second or more—it seemed much longer to Stasie; then he shook hands with the fat lady and walked away, passing Kharapet, who entered at the same moment,

and came straight to where Mrs. Harding stood, still conversing with her friend ; then perceiving Stasie, at once took the seat beside her.

“ You must forgive my prolonged absence,” he said earnestly ; “ but Her Grace was most kind and condescending, and detained me to discuss a plan for a meeting which she proposes to have at Haverford House—a ladies’ meeting—Her Grace in the chair. She wishes to raise a fund to supply the Christian women of Syria with straw hats to supersede veils, and copies of two works which seem to form the foundation of female education in England—*Magnall’s Questions* and *The Guide to Knowledge*—but——”

Stasie interrupted him with a merry laugh. “ What nonsense ! ” she said. “ Do tell me who is the tall gentleman who passed you as you came in ? ”

“ I did not notice any tall gentleman,” returned Kharapet, looking round quickly. “ There are several about here.”

“ Oh ! he has gone away now, but he just passed as you came in, and he is rather more like a remarkable person than any of the others.”

“ Well, *I* did not remark him,” said Kharapet. “ Tell me, Stasie, do these crowds please you ? or

would you not, like myself, prefer the happy seclusion of a peaceful home with those you love beyond all that the world can give of grandeur and ambition?" When Kharapet tried to be charming, he was apt to use what he considered fine language.

Stasie laughed again, and bestowed a mischievous glance upon him. "No matter how much I might love any one," she said, "I should like variety sometimes, and a crowd occasionally! But tell me, are you going to translate *Magnall* and *The Guide to Knowledge*? I assure you they are not worth the trouble! You must tell the Duchess that the march of intellect has left them far behind. And do you believe your countrywomen would wear the straw hats Her Grace wishes to provide?"

A curious smile glittered in Kharapet's eyes. "We must try to gently guide this somewhat ignorant zeal," he said. Here Mrs. Harding brought her prolonged conversation to a close, and approached them. Kharapet rose and offered her his seat. She looked paler than usual, though her eyes were animated.

"Excuse me for leaving you so long," she said

to Stasie, "but I recognised an old friend of my father's—the Dean of Llanmenai—whom I have not seen for years, and we had so much to say to each other. I fear you have felt neglected, dear."

"Not at all! I have been amused looking about and conjecturing who a tall gentleman standing near the door might be. Did you see him, Mrs. Harding?"

"No, my back was to the door."

"I must say, however," resumed Stasie, "that I do not see the use of lighting up one's rooms and decorating them with lovely flowers when there is no dancing or music."

"But there will be music," said Mrs. Harding. "Lady Elizabeth told the Dean that a new American contralto was to make her *début* here this evening, so let us go into the farther drawing-room. I caught a glimpse of a piano there; come, Mr. Kharapet."

They found places with some difficulty, and the best part of the evening now came for Stasie. The American songstress had a glorious voice, and sang with passion and dramatic power. Soon the present ceased to exist, at least for one of her hearers. Other scenes rose up out of the realms of

imagination, and unrolled themselves to Stasie's mental vision ; all that was sweetest and tenderest in her memory awoke to the magic of the music, almost melting her to tears. But suddenly the spell was broken, the music ceased, and Mrs. Harding was saying, " Stasie, here is Mr. Wyatt."

It was so long since Stasie had seen her guardian, she felt as if making his acquaintance for the first time. He was a man below middle height, but broad and stout, with a lion-like head and thick beard which added to the likeness. His eyes were kindly but somewhat unsteady, and the impressiveness of his words was impaired by a slight occasional hesitation.

" Miss Verner, ah ! indeed, to be sure ! Lady Elizabeth mentioned you were to be here. Very glad to see you ! quite grown up—quite a young lady—a charming young lady, eh, Mrs. Harding ? We must be making fresh arrangements for you. Ah ! Kharapet, you little thought what a precious charge your worthy brother committed to our care," he said.

" I am deeply impressed by the sense of my responsibility," returned Kharapet.

“Have you had a—sandwich—or anything? Allow me,” resumed Mr. Wyatt to Mrs. Harding, offering his arm, and leading her towards the wide landing, where light refreshments were laid out. “I have really been so much occupied and overworked,” he went on, after he had administered to the wants of his guests, “that I have been quite unable to attend to my fair ward’s affairs. It is indeed time something definite were arranged. Will you give my compliments to Mr. Harding, and say I am quite at his service (and Mr. Kharapet’s) for any day next week they may choose to appoint, *except* Wednesday, when I am on committee. I fear, my dear Miss Verner, you must think me very negligent of your business, and a ——”

“I fear my affairs must be a trouble to you; but please, Mr. Wyatt, do try and arrange for me to leave school.”

“School! yes, certainly, by all means: quite too bad that you should be shut up at school when you ought to be adorning society. Eh, Kharapet? we must see to this. Another glass of claret, Mrs. Harding—no? Kharapet, do look for Lady Elizabeth. I am not sure what our

engagements are for the next week or ten days, but—a—a—you must really give us the pleasure of your company at dinner or luncheon, or——” he paused, fearful of committing himself. “Perhaps,” he began again more cheerfully and decidedly, “perhaps you might like an admission into the ladies’ gallery of the House of Commons. There is not much going on at present, but next week——”

“Oh, thank you,” cried Stasie, her eyes sparkling; “that will be delightful, will it not, Mrs. Harding? I should so like to hear Gladstone and Disraeli speak.”

“Ah! a young politician. But you will excuse me; I see Prince Zniecouski is going, I must speak to him;” and Mr. Wyatt disappeared just as Kharapet returned with Lady Elizabeth.

“Are you going, Mrs. Harding? it really is not late. What did Mr. Wyatt want?”

“Something about me, I think,” said Stasie, colouring.

“Ah! well, my dear Miss Verner, I shall send you a little note when I know Mr. Wyatt’s wishes, and we must see you sometimes while you are in town. Good-night, Mrs. Harding;

good-night, Mr. Kharapet. By the way, the dear Duchess thinks of fixing the 30th for her meeting. Remember you must lunch here and come with me. I am afraid Mr. Wyatt will not be able to attend; he has to support some stupid motion about factory children. Good-night."

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The conversazione at Lady Elizabeth Wyatt's was on the whole disappointing. Stasie had met with no adventure, and received very little notice. She had in an indistinct way, unacknowledged even to herself, expected both. Kharapet's undisguised admiration had raised her self-estimate to undue proportions, and she had anticipated she knew not what of triumph or success. She dearly loved admiration and amusement, but fortunately for herself was blessed with a certain amount of humour and a healthy readiness to throw aside disagreeables. She therefore told herself she was a fool to expect special success in a London party, where so many prettier, better-dressed, and more highly-bred girls than herself were sure to be assembled. "They are rather different from Miss Boaden's

young ladies," she thought, as she dressed herself next morning. "But some of the people were very queer. Hormuz certainly looked handsome. What lovely eyes he has! He seems quite a favourite with all the great people too. I wonder why he has a sort of timidity in his manner. What has he to be afraid of? That tall dark gentleman looked as if he would have talked coolly to an emperor." Then her thoughts strayed to the cruel disappointment of her generous wish to help her friend Mrs. Mathews. She knew that it took all that good woman's care and forethought—a perpetual mental strain—to make both ends meet, and keep a decent appearance in the eyes of the world. Then she had such a thorn in her side (familiar but admirable simile) in Bob. Stasie recalled an ominous shake of Ella's head when that young man was mentioned, for which she had had no time to ask an explanation, and she feared Mrs. Mathews was not quite aware of all the difficulties which lay before her. What a dreadful shame it was that she (Stasie) was not permitted to help her. What if she spoke to Mr. Wyatt? she would not mind doing it a bit; but somehow she could not

hope much from him, or imagine him opposing Messieurs Harding and Kharapet. "They are all so smooth and civil, but somehow they don't mind me in the least. I am fed and petted, but utterly disregarded as a rational being, and this is to go on for three years. I don't know how I am to bear it. I begin to think I shall quarrel outright with Mr. Harding if I live in the house with him. I believe I had better stay with Mrs. Mathews, boys or no boys. It would be nice too to be near Ella and Mr. Baldwin. What a kind, good little man he is! I wonder, though, she could ever fall in love with him, yet I believe he is clever and learned." Here her meditations were interrupted by the breakfast bell, and she ran away downstairs, for unpunctuality was a deadly sin in Mr. Harding's eyes.

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In the afternoon of the following day Mrs. Harding went out, as Stasie termed it, "in state," to make several ceremonious visits—that is, she put on her very best bonnet, and had a smart hired brougham.

"I know I ought to go with you, for you will be bored to death," said Stasie, as they rose from

luncheon. "But I do want to call on my aunt or grand-aunt, Miss Stretton; she will think me remiss, and I feel drawn towards my only relative. She amuses me too."

"Pray do not mind me," returned Mrs. Harding, smiling. "I am too well accustomed to be bored to shrink from any amount. I will call with you on Miss Stretton and leave you there."

"Thank you very much," cried Stasie, as she went upstairs to make her outdoor toilette.

Miss Stretton's residence was in one of the short streets leading out of Westbourne Grove, which at that period was not absorbed in "Whiteley's" enormous "frontage"—a semi-detached house of good size and appearance, with a rather ragged garden in front, and a rail or two missing from the ornamental fence.

Miss Stretton was at home, and they were shown into a tiny little back parlour, overlooking a garden festooned with clothes hung out to dry, and furnished apparently with old, not elegant, extracts from other and more favoured rooms.

Having caught her foot in a hole in the carpet,

and stumbled against a rickety table which she almost capsized, Mrs. Harding effected an entrance, followed by Stasie.

"This is a miserable place for my aunt to live in," said the latter.

"It is only a temporary abode, I suppose," returned Mrs. Harding. "She does not seem sure of her future plans."

After a few minutes' waiting Miss Stretton, in a rather worn black dress, but with a smart cap, elaborate lace collar, unexceptionable cuffs, and an air of haste, made her appearance.

"Dear Mrs. Harding—my sweet Stasie—how good of you to come so soon to see a lonely individual like myself! How are the precious pets? and you, Stasie? I need not ask; you are the picture of blooming health."

Having received satisfactory assurances that all was well, Miss Stretton drew forward the least unsteady chair for Mrs. Harding's accommodation, rummaged out a moth-eaten hassock for her feet and proceeded—

"I ought to be ashamed to receive you in this poor little parlour after your lovely house, but I know you are too high-minded to despise

those whose worldly goods are few and far between ; and really I am fortunate in having a landlady who permits me to receive my visitors in her private sitting-room,—instead of dragging them up to the top of the house,—for as I hope not to be here long, it would be foolish extravagance to indulge in more than one room.”

“Are you going away, aunt ?” asked Stasie, who felt an indistinctive wish to keep her new-found relative near her. “I hope not.”

“You dear child !” effusively. “I am quite flattered, but what can I do ? I am obliged to seek employment while yet I am active, and provide for a rainy day !”

“Very sensible indeed ; and have you anything in view ?” asked Mrs. Harding.

“Yes ; that is, I have answered an advertisement, which may lead to something. You see,” in a severely judicial tone, “the present rage for education puts me at a disadvantage ! I only profess to be a fairly-well-informed gentlewoman. I might conscientiously undertake to prepare my pupils for refined society, but I could not fit them for learned professorships. So I am out of date, like the lighter graces that lent such a charm to life.”

And Miss Stretton put her head to one side with a little deprecatory smile, as if she embodied all the graces that could charm drawing-room or *salon*. She was unmistakably lady-like, but her refinement was limp, as if damp and hard wear had taken the curl out of it.

Stasie looked kindly down upon her from the glorious heights of youth and strength, both untried and unbroken, and thought how terrible it must be to have lived through both, into the dull cloudy autumn time, even beyond the colouring of the changing leaf, almost into the bareness and darkened days of winter, and to be poor and alone, without the material solace, the luxurious lodging, the delicate eating, the rich clothing, the respectful observance, which waits on wealthy age!

“Surely I can be of some use to *her*,” thought Stasie, as she beamed a bright kindly smile upon her aunt. “I am sure you look quite young,” she said, with the amiable thoughtless flattery of inexperience. “You must not think of growing old.” After a little more conversation, in which Miss Stretton bore the largest share, Mrs. Harding rose, saying she would leave Stasie with her

aunt to find her way home herself, a proposition received with the greatest pleasure.

“You may indeed trust her to me, Mrs. Harding; she will be precious to me as the apple of my eye! I so well remember her poor dear mother on one of the few occasions on which I saw her after her widowhood saying, ‘There is none to whom I should so readily trust my sweet little Stasie as to you, Clementina.’ We were so near of an age that we dispensed with the formalities of aunt and niece.”

When Mrs. Harding had been duly escorted to the garden-gate, and seen off with many hand-kissings and bowings, Miss Stretton returned. “Now, dear, suppose we ascend to my small chamber, *en haut*.” (Miss Stretton liked to use French phrases occasionally). I am in the habit of indulging in a cup of tea at this hour, and I make it myself. You will excuse the homeliness of everything.”

Stasie followed her aunt up three flights of stairs to a front bedroom, where some sticks and a piece of newspaper on the hearthrug bespoke an attempt to light the fire.

The apartment was indeed homely, but neat

and clean; a patchwork coverlet, a darned carpet, and curtainless windows bespoke the poverty of the land. Still Stasie rather enjoyed the task of assisting to light the fire, and set the table, while Miss Stretton from the depths of a painted chest of drawers drew forth tea, sugar, and buns. The whole thing savoured of a surreptitious feast at school, and Aunt Clem (as she requested Stasie to call her) was so kind and so flattering that Stasie grew familiar and more and more attracted to her aunt as the moments flew by. She found herself describing her whole life, confiding her hopes and fears, her likes and dislikes to Miss Stretton, who on her side shed a few tears over the memory of her late niece and the sacrifice she had made for her child's sake; she described Stasie's mother to her in glowing terms, but acknowledged with some reluctance that her daughter did not in the least resemble her. Then shedwelt on the loneliness of her own life, the coldness and ingratitude she had met from so many of those whom she had guided in the way they should go, and led in the paths of propriety and elegance. "And now," she concluded, "I have to go forth again among strangers; it is a hard lot."

“Perhaps there is something better in store for you,” said Stasie, as the idea began to form itself in her mind, that it might be nice to live with Aunt Clem. But, with unusual caution, she kept it to herself. “I must be quite sure what Ella and Mrs. Mathews are going to do first,” she thought.

“I leave myself in the hands of divine Providence,” returned Miss Stretton, lifting her eyes to the ceiling and then dropping them again, with a quick side glance to see what effect her words produced.

Stasie was silent, and after a pause her aunt resumed.

“What a very delightful person Mr. Kharapet appears to be! So interesting, so handsome, so gentle! He seems quite devoted to you, my dear.”

“I am not sure of that,” cried Stasie discontentedly; “at any rate he would not oblige me in a very small matter, and I feel very much put out with him and Mr. Harding.”

“How so?” asked Aunt Clem.

Whereupon Stasie told of the intended uprooting of the Mathews family, of her own great

desire to help them, and of the unfeeling refusal of Messrs. Harding and Kharapet to make any advance—not even a poor hundred pounds.”

“A hundred pounds!” cried Miss Stretton. “My dear, I am not surprised. That is a quantity of money. I don’t think they would be justified in advancing you such a sum. The guardian could call them to account—and for that matter so could *you*. They really must not give you your own money while you are a minor.”

“Well, they might have lent me some of their own. I am sure they have plenty,” said Stasie, with a pout.

“My dear, sweet child,” cried Miss Stretton, “you expect quite too much. It is out of all reason to suppose that two men of business like Mr. Harding and Mr. Kharapet would give their money with so little hope of return, to say nothing of profit. Ah, Stasie! when you have seen as much of the world as I have you will understand the—the impossibility of such a thing.”

“Shall I?” said Stasie. “But they would have lost nothing. I should have paid them; don’t I look honest?”

“Honest! Yes, indeed, and charming too. Still, you must put such ideas out of your head.”

“I suppose so ; but it is very annoying not to be able to help those who have been good to me. And I am sorry, too, that Mrs. Mathews is going to leave London and take boarders. I should have liked to live with her—indeed, I still wish to do so part of my time.

“Ahem!” Miss Stretton cleared her throat. “Whereas, you will, I presume, continue to reside with that very interesting Mrs. Harding, eh?”

“She is nice, isn’t she? But I am not sure that she cares to have me with them ; nor am I sure that I should care to stay.”

“You surprise me! I should imagine that it would be just the place for you—a handsome house and a pleasant companion like Mrs. Harding, and”—breaking off suddenly, and then resuming—“What kind of person is Mr. Harding?”

“Oh, he is very nice to me ; and he is tall and rather good-looking, and sometimes very bright and amusing, but—I don’t think he can stand being contradicted or interfered with, or put out in any way.”

"No man can, my dear. They are all alike in that respect. And what would you like best yourself?"

"I hardly know. First, above everything, I should like to travel. I have seen nothing—nothing all my life but Islington and Forest Hill. Then I should like to come back, and stay a while with Mrs. Mathews, and move about, and all that, till I am twenty-one. By that time I shall really know what I want, and what is best to do."

"By that time, dear child, you will be married," exclaimed Aunt Clem. "With your face and your fortune you will be married—I hope to some distinguished man. Meantime I am sure your ideas are very sensible. How you would enjoy the beauty, the sunshine, the art, the—the general delightfulness of Italy—the gaiety of Paris—the music of Dresden!"

"Have you enjoyed all this?" asked Stasie, with admiration.

"Yes, I have indeed—that is, I have to a certain degree. It has not always been my lot to travel with genial, sympathetic, kindly young creatures like yourself, dear Stasie; but too often in charge of scornful misses, who showed me that

my superiority bored them, and my dependence called forth disdain."

"What horrid disagreeable things!" cried Stasie.

"Yes; my position did not permit me to enjoy to the full the pleasures of travelling. My digestion, too, is delicate, and foreign cookery tried it much. Still—and this is strictly between ourselves, my love—should matters be arranged according to your wishes, I should not mind braving the minor discomforts of continental life to be your 'guide, philosopher, and friend,' if I may so express it. I feel sure that in you I would have the kindest, the most interesting companion."

"I don't think I should be disagreeable," said Stasie, reflectively. "And I am sure it is quite a delightful idea—it would be so nice and natural to travel with my own aunt. I will really speak to my guardian about it. Would it be very expensive?"

"No, not by any means," replied Miss Stretton quickly. "That is, with an experienced traveller like myself. By the way, who is your guardian, my dear?"

“Mr. Percy Wyatt. He is rather a grandee, and his wife, Lady Elizabeth, is so funny.”

“Very distinguished people indeed, and very enlightened. I am told that Mr. Wyatt is to have a seat in the Cabinet. They are well known in France and Italy, and might be most useful to us. Alas, Stasie! mine is a lonely and somewhat hard life; nor is there much brightness in my future.”

“Perhaps there will be more brightness in it than you expect,” said Stasie significantly. “I am sure I can feel for you, for I am often very lonely myself, knowing that I belong to nobody and nobody belongs to me—especially since I knew Ella Mathews was going to be married.”

“Ah, my dear, you are young and charming, *and* rich. I was not a fright myself; but, dear me, money, money, was always the obstacle; and I am lonely, poor, and growing old.”

Miss Stretton pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

“I am sure you were ever so nice,” cried Stasie sympathetically; “and as we are both alone, let us stick by each other.”

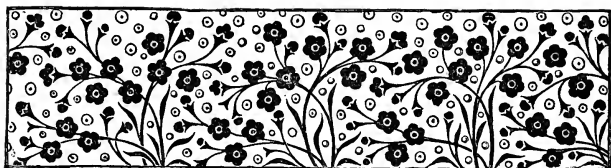
“You dear, warm-hearted girl!” cried Miss

Stretton, coming over to kiss her brow. "I feel that a kind, a heavenly Father has sent you to be a comfort and a solace to me!—only, it would be as well not to say that we discussed the question until—until you can prepare those gentlemen who have your affairs in their hands. They might think *I* put you up to—that I originated the idea, whereas it came from you entirely, my love."

"Of course it did; and I will take care. It is too bad that I cannot have what I want, for I am not unreasonable. Still, I think I shall manage."

After this the conversation turned on dress, and Miss Stretton gave her niece many excellent and economical hints. Then it was time for Stasie to return. Her aunt insisted on walking part of the way and putting her into a cab.

"I must take care of the only relative left me, and one who, I am sure, well deserves it. Good-bye, my dear child. We must try and carry out our little scheme of foreign travel, only pray be cautious, my sweet Stasie—very cautious."



CHAPTER VII.

It wanted yet an hour to dinner when Stasie reached York Gate, and hearing from the servant that Mrs. Harding had returned, she ran quickly upstairs to the drawing-room, eager to take counsel with her friend respecting the new and delightful plan which she had just formed.

On opening the door she saw Mrs. Harding, still in her bonnet and black lace mantle, sitting on a sofa beside a small work-table, on which her arm rested, a brighter and more tender expression than she usually wore lighting up her face, and evidently in deeply-interesting conversation with a gentleman who was reposing in a large easy-chair, his feet stretched far out, and his hat on the carpet beside him—a gentleman whom Stasie immediately recognised as the possible essayist, political economist, or war correspondent who had attracted her attention the evening

before. Seeing her hostess thus engaged, she made a movement as if to retire, but Mrs. Harding, perceiving her, exclaimed, "Come here, Stasie; don't run away. My cousin, Dr. Brooke, —Miss Verner."

Stasie came forward with a strange sensation of shyness—of being supremely awkward.

Dr. Brooke rose very deliberately, made Stasie a grand bow, and moved as though he would have brought her a chair, but she hastily placed herself on the sofa beside Mrs. Harding, and began to untie her bonnet almost unconsciously. "Dr. Brooke!"—only a doctor, when she had expected him to be a colonel or a correspondent at least.

"Well, Stasie, have you had a pleasant visit with your aunt?" asked Mrs. Harding.

"Oh yes! very pleasant; she is so kind. She was telling me of her travels. It must be charming to travel. I wish——" Stasie stopped abruptly, though brimful of her subject; she remembered it would not do to broach it before a stranger.

"Were you at Lady Elizabeth Wyatt's reception the night before last?" asked Dr. Brooke, a little abruptly, of Mrs. Harding.

“I was.”

“I wonder I did not come across you. I saw Miss Verner, who was, I suppose, with you?”

“Yes; and I saw you,” cried Stasie, with a little nod. She had quite got over her momentary feeling of awkwardness. “Mrs. Harding was beside me, but her face was turned away.”

“Ah! had I seen you I should have recognised you immediately. You are changed, of course, yet still very much the same,” remarked Dr. Brooke to Mrs. Harding. But he gave Stasie a quiet, contemplative look, as if she were an object of philosophic interest.

“Yes; it must be nearly twelve years since we met,” returned Mrs. Harding, with a pensive smile and a far-away look in her eyes.

“About twelve! What antiquities we must seem to your young friend!” rejoined Dr. Brooke; “yet it is but a short time to look back upon.” His voice struck Stasie as remarkably pleasant,—deep, clear, refined,—what she was disposed to think a “sensible voice,” as if the metal that produced those full distinct tones must be of the best quality.

“Short! do you find the time short?” Mrs.

Harding was saying; while Stasie thought thus: "I think it is a tremendously long period, a cycle, a century!"

"Well, it has been the most stirring period of your life, the transformation from a schoolgirl to the head of a family. Eh, Livy?"

"Yes, a transformation, indeed," returned Mrs. Harding softly, thoughtfully; then rousing herself she exclaimed, "Oh, Stasie, I forgot—there is a letter for you from 'Forest Hill,' I see. It is on the table there by the door."

"From 'Forest Hill!'" cried Stasie, starting up and walking to the other end of the room to take it. "I wonder what Miss Boaden has to write about?" and she stood there for some minutes, first reading her letter, then evidently reflecting upon it.

"What has become of the Falconers?" asked Dr. Brooke, after a short pause, during which he looked in the same quietly scrutinising way after Stasie. "They are distant relations, are they not?"

"They are. Old Mr. Falconer is dead, the boys are in Canada and New Zealand," etc. etc.; and Mrs. Harding plunged into family history for a

few minutes till interrupted by Stasie, who came slowly back and stood by the sofa, the letter in her hand, and a suspiciously moist look in her eyes. "Well, and what does Miss Boaden say?" asked Mrs. Harding kindly, seeing she was waiting to be spoken to.

"She wants to know when I am going back, and wonders I have not written. She thinks I have lost time enough,—so do I, but not for the same reasons! There is nothing to learn at Forest Hill. If I might have some really good masters, some——" breaking off suddenly. "What ought I to say, Mrs. Harding? I don't want to go back. But I must not trouble you now." And Stasie gathered up her gloves and parasol as if going.

"I am quite willing to be troubled, dear. You must tell Miss Boaden that we cannot part with you yet, and that I will write to her next week myself."

"Oh, thank you, dear Mrs. Harding! I will go and answer this at once."

"It will be time enough to-morrow." But Stasie, whose perceptions were keen and sensitive, fancied that Mrs. Harding and her cousin

would prefer their *tête-à-tête* unbroken by her presence, said, "I would rather write now," and, with a slight bow to the doctor, left the room.

"Who is the young lady?" asked Dr. Brooke.

Mrs. Harding briefly explained.

"She is a handsome girl," he observed critically; "not pretty, but fine; her honest, steadfast eyes struck me last night. I observe that you rarely meet, except among Englishwomen, girls who look straight and fearlessly at you, yet without a tinge of consciousness or boldness. She has a splendid physique too."

"What a professional view of the subject!" said Mrs. Harding, laughing.

"A rational one. What is so admirable as perfect health and full development? Well, Livy, you seem to have changed for the better, from the tumbledown old vicarage to this handsome house and your present surroundings."

A faint colour rose to Mrs. Harding's cheek as she replied—"No house can ever be more lovely in my eyes than that sweet old home; but you are right—this is a nice house, and I wish the children were in; but I shall see you often while you are in town, I hope. Do you make any stay?"

“I am quite uncertain—in fact I am uncertain about my plans altogether. I was in London about a month ago, and then I went into Wales to see an old acquaintance who is settled there. Since I came back I have been trying to find you out, for I had no idea where you were; I have scarcely had a correspondent in England.”

“No? well, you certainly dropped us all as soon as you went to India,” replied Mrs. Harding with an arch smile.

“Much the wisest thing I could do under my circumstances,” said Brooke, returning her smile. “Ah, what jolly days we have had together in old times. By Jove! it brings back another and a different stage of existence to see you again and hear your voice telling of all our former friends.” He looked at her kindly, gravely, and very searchingly.

“Yes,” she replied calmly, almost coldly, “the present is widely different in all ways from the past. Now tell me of yourself—what you have done, and what are you going to do?”

“On the whole, I have not done badly. You know, though I was not the steadiest of fellows, I could always work when I chose. You remem-

ber I was appointed assistant-surgeon to the ——— Dragoons just as the Regiment was ordered to India. Well, I saw a good deal of service there, —I mean professional service,—for my superior was old and lazy. It was a pleasant life too. I got my share of tiger-shooting and pig-sticking. Then came the Mutiny. I shouldn't like to live through that time again ! I was twice hit when looking after the wounded in action—rather badly hit the second time. Then I held a pretty good temporary appointment while matters were being settled ; but having had a bad attack of fever, I thought it better to take my leave, and come home. So here I am, not knowing if I shall return to India, or try and make a practice in some English town. I shall look about me for a twelvemonth or so and decide ; I really don't much care which way, only I fancy I shall be better in health here."

"Yes, I should think so," said Mrs. Harding, "and I hope you will. You would be a friend to—to my children, Jim ; for you know I have no near relative—no *man* relative I mean."

"I trust you will never need my services," he returned, looking keenly at her, for there was a slight pathetic hesitation in her speech. "Mr.

Harding, your husband, is in good health, I hope, and seems to have plenty of this world's goods."

"Oh yes, and is a most affectionate father; still it is always better for a woman to have a big brother of some kind behind her."

"Perhaps it is," he said thoughtfully, dropping his eyelids till nearly closed; "perhaps it is, and you were always a shocking little coward, Livy, but a sweet little coward too—a sort of little coward that generally finds men ready to work for her, and if needs be die, for her. Eh, Livy?"

Mrs. Harding burst into a laugh—a harsher laugh than might be expected from so soft and gentle a woman.

"You must indeed have been living 'far from the haunts of men' to have preserved such chivalrous ideas, Jim. I never expect any one to work or die for me; but if—if I wanted——" She stopped, and evidently changed her intended speech—"sound advice about the children, or—or myself, you would take more interest in us than a stranger."

"Oh, professional advice! I assure you every medical man takes an equally profound interest

in his cases, whether they are personal friends or not."

"I cannot believe that," said Mrs. Harding candidly.

"You may, I assure you. By the way, are you sure you do not want advice now? You have not developed as I always expected you would."

"How ought I to have developed?"

"Into decided *embonpoint*—into a sleek roly-poly little woman, with very bright eyes and a beautiful complexion, a little lazy and very merry. Now you are thin and pale—*too* thin and pale. How is that?"

"How can I tell?" said Mrs. Harding, laughing good-humouredly. "But I am very glad I have developed my own way, not yours. I suspect I am all the better for not being a rolypoly!"

"I hope so," said the doctor gravely. "You have had no doubt some of the trials almost inseparable from motherhood. Have you lost any children?"

"Yes, one—a sweet little girl! my second child. It was a cruel blow." Her soft eyes were suffused with tears.

"No doubt; but these babies cannot make a place in your life. It is a wound that heals quickly."

Mrs. Harding shook her head.

"I should like to see your babies," continued Dr. Brooke. "I shall come again soon, but will bid you good-bye now. It must be nearly your dinner hour!"

Mrs. Harding flushed slightly; she would have liked to have kept him to dinner, but was not sufficiently mistress in her own house to take such a liberty. "You will leave your address, Jim? Mr. Harding would like to call. He will be very pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I feel quite anxious to make his, I assure you," he returned, taking out his card-case to place a card on the table. "What are you going to do with your handsome young friend? not to send her back to school? That would be cruel and absurd."

"I should like to keep her with me. She is a charming companion, but her fate is not in my hands!"

"She looks like a girl that would prefer directing it herself. Well, good - morning,

Livy! I suppose it must be Mrs. Harding before the general public?"

"I suppose so—good-bye, Jim!"

When Mrs. Harding was alone she took up Dr. Brooke's card and stood for several minutes gazing on it—but gazing with dry eyes and a quiet set face—a face from which hope seemed to have gone—utterly and for ever—so still and cold did it look. She was roused by the door opening to admit the children, fresh and rosy from their afternoon walk. Her countenance cleared, her lips relaxed, and, sitting down, she took little Willie on her knee and began to ask him about the boat he had been sailing.

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Stasie, in the retirement of her own chamber, lost no time in answering Miss Boaden's letter. She did this with mixed feelings. She thought from Mrs. Harding's manner that she was not again to be imprisoned within the respectable walls of Elmwood House, and she rejoiced at her prospective freedom. Nevertheless, she felt an unexpected tender regret at the idea of bidding a final farewell even to her enemy Miss Amelia. Still more deeply did she feel that she was drifting away

from her old friend Mrs. Mathews and her family in spite of herself. "Yet I can go and see them if I like," she mused; "and by and by, when everything is settled, for they must arrange for me to live somewhere, and give me some money for clothes and things" ("they" meant Harding and Kharapet), "I shall be able to pay Ella a visit, and make her a present now and then! How nice it would be to travel with Aunt Clem! to learn to sing and to speak German, and see all the delightful places she has seen. I suppose that Dr. Brooke has travelled a great deal, but there is no knowing. I thought he must be somebody very distinguished, and he is only a doctor, after all."

Her letter finished, Stasie, who was violently tidy by fits and starts, applied herself to arrange her drawers, and put fresh lace in the sleeves and collar of a dress, speculating meanwhile if she should ever rise to the dignity of having a maid of her own.

Mr. Harding was a little late for dinner—and somewhat silent thereat—and the repast was nearly over before Stasie, who was generally the principal talker, made up her mind how to open the subject of her return to school.

“I had a letter from Miss Boaden to-day, Mr. Harding. She wants me to go back,” she said at length.

“She does, does she? and I suppose you are very anxious to go—eh Stasie?”

“*You* know about that! Mrs. Harding said I might write that I should not return just yet.”

“Hum! so she is not tired of you! Well, Stasie, curiously enough, *I* have been writing to Miss Boaden myself to-day.”

“What about, dear Mr. Harding?”

“Only to tell her that you will not return to school after the holidays; and as they are only three weeks off, you may as well stay where you are—so you can go to Forest Hill and pack up your belongings as soon as you like!”

“Oh, thank you, that is delightful! And you will let me live with you—that is to say, when I am in England.”

“When you are in England! pray where are you going to?”

“I am sure I don’t know; only I am not going to stay in London all my life!”

“God knows what an enterprising young lady of your sort may do! At any rate you are

welcome to stay here till you have a house of your own !”

“ You are very good and kind,” said Stasie warmly. “ I should like a house of my own by and by when things are settled, but above all I want to travel.”

“ Well, you must just wait a bit,” said Mr. Harding a little impatiently ; and his wife, with the watchful tact born of much experience in the art of management, rose and led the way to the drawing-room.

“ Be satisfied with one step at a time Stasie,” she said, as she opened her work-basket. “ You may lose more than you gain by asking for too much.”

“ It is rather hard to be obliged to beg for what one has a right to,” cried Stasie indignantly, throwing herself into a large easy-chair. Why should I *not* go abroad ? there is nothing unreasonable in the wish.”

“ Certainly not. And I daresay later you will be able to carry it out ; but for the present would it not be wiser to wait patiently for the consent of those who are, I am sure, doing their best ? Believe me, we are neither better nor happier

for having everything our own way, especially at your age."

"Perhaps so. But it is very disagreeable to be contradicted," replied Stasie, adding after a pause. "I am sure, dear Mrs. Harding, I am always very happy with you, and—and would it bore you if I had music lessons? I cannot be quite idle!"

"It would not bore me in the least! You are quite right, Stasie; there is nothing so dull as idleness."

"And let me teach dear little Ethel and Willie to read!"

"*That* you are most heartily welcome to try," said Mrs. Harding, laughing; "you will not like the task long."

"I assure you I can be persevering! There, there is the front-door bell. I daresay it is Hormuz Kharapet."

"Ah! I do not think he would come in the evening when he had not been invited to dinner, unless, indeed, he has business with Mr. Harding."

"Why don't you like Hormuz? he is so nice and gentle."

“Why do you suppose I do not like him?”

“I cannot explain why, but I am *quite* sure you do not.” Mrs. Harding laughed, and Stasie changed the subject by consulting her friend as to what day would be best to fetch away her things from Elmwood House. This interesting discussion was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Harding, followed by Kharapet. Mr. Harding was looking brighter than he had done at dinner. Kharapet, having greeted Mrs. Harding, drew a chair beside Stasie. “I have not seen you since Lady Elizabeth’s party,” he said slowly, while his glittering eyes, half veiled by their long lashes, dwelt on her intensely, hungrily; but Stasie was so much occupied with the intricacies of a lace cravatte she was making for Mrs. Mathews, that she did not heed them, and he gazed to his heart’s content.

“No? How fast time goes in London!” returned Stasie, a little irrelevantly. “Do you know I am not to go back to school, Hormuz?” looking suddenly in his face — an odd feeling, partly surprise, partly nervousness, making her laugh as she met his eyes. “Are you astonished?”

“I am *not*, considering that I was the chief cause of the change you so much desired. I was determined, whatever the obstacles, that you should not be sent back to the imprisonment you hate.”

While Kharapet was whispering assurances that Stasie's wishes were his law, Mrs. Harding was saying, “I had a visit from Dr. Brooke to-day. You remember hearing us speak of my cousin Jim?”

“Ay,” taking up the card his wife held out, “I remember. I fancy he must be the Dr. Brooke old Pearson, our chairman, was speaking of yesterday. He has just come back from India hasn't he?”

“He has.”

“I'll call on him, and have him to dinner. I dare say he could give me a wrinkle about ——”

What, did not appear, for Stasie broke in, “I am sure that Dr. Brooke must have travelled a great deal. He looks like it. He is the man I asked you about, Hormuz,—at Lady Elizabeth Wyatt's, I mean; you had not observed him. Don't you remember?”

Hormuz did remember; and his face grew

serious as he asked, "Who? who is this gentleman?"

"A cousin of my wife's! You must come and meet him, Kharapet."

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Stasie's next visit to her good friend Mrs. Mathews was rather painful in more ways than one. First, it was a farewell. The old house was dismantled; the rusty untidy little den where she had often stolen away from her work or lessons to devour novels, poetry, plays, anything she could lay her hands upon, was absolutely empty, as most of the heavy luggage had already been despatched, and the family were crowded into two or three rooms. Secondly, Mrs. Matthews was not so cordial as formerly; she remarked that no doubt it was an effort for Stasie to come all that way from the grand house she was staying in now to their humble abode, or she might have come oftener to see them, though, perhaps, she (Mrs. Mathews) ought to be thankful that she came at all, etc. etc., stings which soon roused Stasie to indignant remonstrance, and finally to a torrent of tears, when Ella interposed, standing up manfully for her friend.

“You don’t know how hampered and worried I am,” sobbed Stasie; “I cannot do as I like! Besides, it would not be civil to walk out of the house when I chose, without caring whether Mrs. Harding wanted me or not. But if you think I would rather be sitting in her grand drawing-room, doing crochet or wool-work, instead of helping you to pack with my gown tucked up, you are very much mistaken! I wish you would not be so unkind, Mrs. Mathews! When I am more my own mistress you will see I do not forget all your goodness to me.”

“Well, well, Stasie, I never thought you a heartless child! but law! my dear, the world soon changes the best of us! There, dry your eyes, and have a cup of tea. I would much rather believe you to be kind and true than a weather-cock.”

“That she is not, I am sure,” cried Ella heartily. “Do not mind mother, Stasie! she is tired and worried. We are very anxious about Bob! There is nothing for him to do in C——, so he will be sure to get into mischief, and he ought to go on working for his diploma. Fortunately, our old friends Mr. and Mrs. Deacon have

offered to take him in till he can look about him ; still it will be money out of mother's pocket, and I know he is in debt—not much, I daresay, but always more than we can afford. If it were not for Bob I declare we should be too happy !”

“ Well, well, Bob will come right yet,” said the fond mother. “ I can see the poor lad is dreadfully down at the idea of parting with us.”

Stasie opened her eyes at this, but wisely held her tongue. A friendly cup of tea succeeded, in which all bitterness seemed to be drowned, and the future was fully discussed.

Ella was not to be married for a month or two, as she wished to assist her mother in settling in her home, so as to be quite prepared for the October term, for which date they had already secured one boarder, and had the promise of another.

“ It will make me quite independent and comfortable if I can get four or five,” said Mrs. Mathews. “ Janet is getting now to be a great help, and, I will say, is a steady, industrious girl, so she can do most of the housekeeping, but no one will ever be to me what Ella is,” etc. etc. etc.

Peace and good understanding being tho-

roughly restored, Stasie parted with her old and valued friends not dry-eyed. After many hearty hugs and kisses, promises to write, and assurances of constancy, she was carefully put into a cab by Mrs. Mathews herself, who demanded the driver's ticket, and gave him the address, with many injunctions to take special care of the young lady.





CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Stasie returned to Mrs. Harding's, bringing with her all her worldly goods, and having bade a final adieu to school life, she experienced but little of the exultant joy with which she was wont to anticipate that event.

She was rather vexed with herself for feeling pleased. She accused herself of being hard and ungrateful to the Misses Boaden. After all, their lives were far from easy: their task was no child's play, and had they not done their best for her? Had *she* done her best for them?

There is in young creatures of the higher type an exalted idea of what life ought to be, of which their elders, from whose hearts the rude contact of the work-a-day world has brushed these fair and delicate impressions, have seldom any notion. A supreme sense of duty at all costs—of self-devotion at any sacrifice—of con-

duct pure, graceful, self-restrained, which only needs consistency and the power of resistance to make youth more dignified than age. These two essential ingredients are, however, what youth generally lacks. Would youth be youth had it the force to act up to its own ideal? And so the sweetest, kindest girls often walk unevenly among the snares and pitfalls of their onward path, with here a vista of pleasure too tempting to be resisted, and there a stumbling-stone of irritation too big and rugged to be surmounted, while consciousness of the weak places thus probed, the vulnerable points thus discovered, galls and humiliates—not always strengthening the spirit against the next encounter, save in those rare instances where power is equal to aspiration.

Few who have not been admitted into the full confidence of higher-toned girlish hearts can imagine how little pleasure, as mere pleasure, enters into their scheme of life.

With all her vitality, her sense of enjoyment, her little surface vanity, Stasie's was a nature of this order. This necessity to be in sympathy with and useful to her fellows gave poignancy

to her regret at her own isolation. She owed no particular duty to any one. She had nothing to do but to please herself.

If she had a grumpy grandfather, a sickly sister, an exacting father or mother, it would be more satisfactory. As it was, the best thing perhaps she could do was to adopt Aunt Clem. She was the only person to whom she could possibly be necessary, and, though a dear good soul, would probably want bearing with and humouring occasionally. To Mrs. Mathews Stasie felt she could never be so essential. Mrs. Mathews had her own large family to struggle for and with, to love and to be loved by: a little money help kindly and delicately administered was all she needed. But Aunt Clem was like herself, utterly alone. She was also growing old and very poor. Aunt Clem therefore, for the present, must be Stasie's object.

Thus reflecting, Stasie dressed for dinner. She was pleased at the idea of meeting Dr. Brooke, who was expected, though he *was* only a doctor. She hoped she would have an opportunity of talking to him. She wanted to put many questions to him, and was determined not

to lose her chance. Stasie was not shy, but she had too much natural taste and tact to be in the least forward.

Having attired herself carefully in one of her pretty new dresses of soft French gray and white lace, and braided her light-brown hair into broad plaits behind her little ears, looping them up to the coil at the back of her head, she went downstairs.

The drawing-room was only occupied by the children. Johnnie was in a rocking-chair, which was a source of great delight; Willie and Ethel stood at a little distance watching him rock to and fro with some violence.

“Stasie, he has been rocking himself ever so long, and he won’t give me a turn,” cried Ethel, running to meet her.

“No, I haven’t,” said Johnnie, “and I am not going to give up to a bit of a girl like you.”

“You are a rude selfish boy,” remarked Stasie. Passing him she took up an illustrated book, and knowing it would create an ill-timed disturbance if she tried to evict the tenant of the chair, she called the two little ones to her.

“Come and sit by me on the sofa, and I will tell you stories about these pictures.”

"We have seen all those," said Ethel discontentedly.

"Well, bring me another book, Willie."

"We have seen them all," remarked Ethel.

"Never mind. Stasie, tell us about the other sides of the pictures."

"Yes, I will, you dear little man," cried Stasie, delighted with the child's quaint speech, and taking the book he brought, she established herself on a large sofa at the end of the room, a small hearer at each side. Ethel knelt, resting an arm on Stasie's shoulder, and gazing on the page below. Willie sat beside her upon one leg, the other hanging down, his elbow on Stasie's lap, his eyes fixed on her face, absorbed in the fairyland of wicked giants and lovely injured fairy godmothers' children which she proceeded to open up to him. It was a pleasant picture, as the door opened and Dr. Brooke was announced. He advanced, grave, cool, a smile in his eyes. Stasie put aside her encumbrances and rose to meet him. "Mrs. Harding will be here directly," she said, not quite sure if she ought or ought not to give him her hand. He decided for her by making a rather formal bow.

“I fancy I am too early,” he returned; “but I wanted to make my small cousins’ acquaintance, and feared they might not be visible after dinner.”

“I will present them,” said Stasie. “Come here, Johnnie,”—to the “rebel of the family,” who had ceased to rock, and sat looking at the new-comer with curiosity not untinged with awe,—“This is Master John Harding, the eldest son, and here is Willie, the youngest; this young lady is Miss Ethel Harding, who comes between them.”

Dr. Brooke shook hands with Johnnie, then placing his hand on the child’s head put it back, and looked earnestly in his face. “Glad to see you, my boy. No trace of the mother or her people here! Ah! Willie, you are of a different brand! You are not too old to be kissed. And Miss Harding! come here! *You* have your mother’s eyes. I congratulate you.” He kissed the two younger ones kindly, and took Ethel on his knee. Willie retreated to Stasie, and Johnnie stood looking distrustfully at the stranger.

“I can remember Mrs. Harding about the age of this child,” said Dr. Brooke to Stasie, “a most delicate little lady.”

"Papa says I am more like my Aunt Mills," said Ethel with a pout.

"So much the worse for you," he returned. "Who is Aunt Mills?" to Stasie.

"A sister of Mr. Harding's, I think."

"And you, my little man," stretching out his hand to Willie. "So you make Miss—Miss——" he paused—

"Verner," supplied Stasie, noting in her own mind that he had forgotten her name—

"Thank you!—Miss Verner tell you stories. Are you not a lucky little fellow?"

"Yes! Such pretty stories, all about fairies in the woods, and sometimes poor peasants and giants and even ogres."

"I don't care for them; they are all nonsense," said John, who was in a contradictory mood.

"What a wiseacre!" replied Dr. Brooke. "Why, if they do not take care, you will set the Thames on fire. Do you like the stories, Miss Curly Locks?"

"Oh yes! And Stasie dresses my doll. Stasie can cut out paper boats and crosses and——"

"What a clever young lady!"—a laughing glance at her. "Do you think she would tell us

a story while we are waiting for mother?—Is it mother or mamma?”

“Mamma, I am sorry to say,” replied Stasie.

“Yes, ‘mother’ is better. But will not Miss Verner tell us a story?”

“Do, do, do, Stasie, dear!”

“No. Dr. Brooke has been in Fairyland himself; he *ought* to know beautiful stories,—real ones,—not merely made up, like mine.”

“I have no genius for story-telling; I am too matter-of-fact.”

“Don’t say that,” cried Stasie impulsively. “You do not look like it. I hate matter-of-fact people!”

“Indeed!” very gravely. “Then I retract the statement.”

Stasie laughed merrily. “I am glad you do.”

“You have been away in India,” observed Johnnie, who was contemplating his new acquaintance with profound attention; “and papa says you ought to have made heaps of money there. Have you?”

“I deeply regret to say I have not.”

“Why not?” persisted Johnnie.

“Go and tell mamma that Dr. Brooke is here,”

said Stasie, blushing at the boy's rude speech, yet unable to subdue a smile at the characteristic inquiry.

The doctor laughed mockingly. "By all means send off the young gentleman, lest his inquiries should display my weakness too plainly."

"I don't want to go," said Johnnie, and stepped out upon the balcony.

"Won't you tell us a story?" persisted Willie, slipping his hand into Dr. Brooke's.

"Mine would be too grim for a little man like you," he returned. "Miss Verner's fancies must be much pleasanter. You, too, have been in the East, Mrs. Harding tells me," addressing her.

"So long ago that I cannot remember it; but I should like to go there again. Indeed I long to travel *anywhere*."

The doctor smiled upon her an indulgent smile—"As if I were an infant like Ethel," she thought indignantly; and then their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Harding.

Stasie remarked that she greeted her guest with unusual cordiality, and that he, too, was more animated in his manner than when speak-

ing to the children. In a few minutes they were joined by Mr. Harding, who was loud and profuse in his apologies for being a little late, and seemed anxious to impress on his wife's relative that he was particularly glad to see him. It had never before occurred to Stasie's inexperience that her friend and ally, Mr. Harding, was common or underbred; but contrasting the repose, the ease of Dr. Brooke's manner, with the kind of rough cordiality assumed by her host, she felt his inferiority, and this added a shade or two more to the half-unconscious distrust which was gradually deepening in her mind towards him.

Mr. Williams, a gentleman who had more than once dined at York Gate during Stasie's sojourn, and the inevitable Kharapet having joined them, they went down to dinner.

The conversation was unusually animated, as the new guest's opinions were different on most matters from those of his *convives*'. Nor did he hesitate to show this difference distinctly, though civilly. His way of expressing himself, too, though plain and straightforward, bore the stamp of thought and culture, and Stasie was well content to listen, disregarding the whispers of

Kharapet, who sat beside her. He spoke little to any one else, but at times listened to what was going on with very close attention. When the repast was over, and the servants had left the room, something was said about Giuliani in the *Trovatore*, upon which Stasie exclaimed how much she should like to hear an opera.

“It is not easy for us to go,” returned Mrs. Harding. “Neither Mr. Harding nor Mr. Kharapet like to face the discomforts of a theatre; and I think Stasie and I require an escort to such a crowded place as the Italian Opera.”

“Why do you not make use of me?” asked Dr. Brooke. “I am an idle man at present, and though I should prefer a play, I have no objection to an opera.”

“That would be delightful,” cried Stasie. “Do—do fix a day, dear Mrs. Harding.”

“Tell me what days you are disengaged,” said Dr. Brooke, “and leave the affair in my hands.”

“But you wrong me,” exclaimed Kharapet eagerly. “I should always be ready to go with you where I could be of use, though I do not pretend to enjoy these exhibitions!”

"Then it is better to have some one who does, for it is not pleasant to know you are inflicting a punishment," said Stasie gaily.

"No service I could render to you would be a punishment to me," returned Kharapet. "But I confess I neither enjoy nor approve these musical and dancing entertainments. I am of my noble and good friend Lord Saintsbury's opinion, that it is derogatory to the charming young ladies of England to witness such things. In the East we take better care of our ladies."

"Do you never admit Nautch girls into your houses in Syria?" asked Dr. Brooke. "I had some friends with Outram's expedition who gave me curious accounts of the Nautch dances at Baghdad."

"They are never permitted in the houses of Syrian Christians," replied Kharapet with some emphasis.

"Oh, indeed!" said Brooke. "I beg your pardon. Well, Mrs. Harding, when shall we go to this shocking exhibition?"

"Any day you like next week. To-morrow will be Saturday, and of course there is no chance of getting places."

"I hope you will see that my dinner and all that is cared for," said Mr. Harding. "I need not be uncomfortable as well as deserted."

"You should dine at your club," returned Brooke.

"I am so domesticated I do not belong to one," rejoined Harding.

"A great mistake! Mrs. Harding, you ought to have him put up at the 'Reform;' every man ought to join a club."

"You ought to join mine, the 'West Central.' It is a capital club,—meet every body,—great opportunities for discussing business matters, and an excellent cook," said Mr. Williams.

"Well, I'll see about it," returned Harding, as his wife rose to leave the room followed by Stasie.

"Come up here, doctor," said the host, making a place by him after the ladies left, "and try a glass of this port. It's not bad; in fact, it's a sin to throw it away on women."

"They seldom avail themselves of their chances in that way," said Brooke, moving into the place offered him. "It is rather a feminine failing to be indifferent to the joys of the palate."

"I am not so sure!" replied Williams.

“Some of them are a little too fond of alcohol, if we are to believe all we hear.”

“A small minority, I imagine.”

“Fill your glass, Williams,” cried the host; “don’t mind Kharapet. It’s his misfortune more than his fault that he can’t drink a decent glass of wine.”

“You are to be congratulated,” remarked the doctor gravely, “on having a necessity the less—nevertheless—it is well to be able to enjoy a firstrate vintage, such as this, Mr. Harding.”

“Right you are, doctor,” he returned heartily. Mr. Harding was rarely seen to greater advantage than when entertaining his male guests—pride in the excellence of his wine—both as a delicacy and a representative of money’s worth, pleasure in the gustation, backed by the presence and encouragement of others, and supported under the extra expenditure by a subtle imaginative hope that in some indirect way the outlay would bring forth profit, either in extending his connection or securing similar enjoyment at the cost of others, warmed him into hospitality. At present, for some reason,

he was anxious to be civil to, and make a good impression on his wife's cousin.

"And so, doctor, I hear you are nearly tired of grilling under an Eastern sun."

"Not exactly. In some respects I like India, but I begin to think I might do better at home; the career of a military surgeon is limited."

"No doubt," said Mr. Williams. "If you could get a start in a new neighbourhood, it would be the making of you." Dr. Brooke looked at him, but made no immediate reply; the familiarity of the remark did not please him.

"As I do not drink wine, may I be allowed to join the ladies?" asked Kharapet, rising.

"To be sure," said Harding, laughing. "You are not much good away from them—one of them at any rate." An indescribable smile, self-satisfied, sensual, overspread the Syrian's face as he left the room—an expression that made Brooke feel a strong desire to quench him with a sudden douche of cold water from the glass jug which was temptingly near. "Well, well, we all have our mad fits, as I dare say you both know," continued Mr. Harding apologetically; "but to return, as you are looking about you,

doctor, Mr. Williams will tell you about a locality which is worth your notice—a very rising place indeed.”

“Yes; as a connection of my worthy friend Harding here, I don’t mind putting you up to a good thing, either as a residence or an investment. Two or three years ago a few sound City men observed a property in Surrey, in a capital situation, half an hour from Waterloo Station, unoccupied and in the market. They thought it a promising spot for villas, and they formed themselves into a ‘Landed Estate Company,’ bought up the property, advanced money to tenants who wished to build, made roads and drains, put up fences, and divided it into plots. So far we have been very successful. (I am solicitor to the Company.) We have a splendid site for a church, where there is a temporary iron erection, and many of the houses are let to most respectable people. All we want is a resident doctor of high standing, and then having provided for the religious and bodily health of our tenantry we shall do well. If you, my dear sir, will make a small investment—say a couple of thousand pounds—you can be your own landlord in a sense, or erect

a mansion for yourself! I omitted to mention that there is an affiliated company linked with ours—The Sefton Park Building Company, Limited. This Company builds houses of a first-rate order at wonderfully low terms, shares ruling at seventy-five, and rising rapidly. I will send you a prospectus. Mr. Harding is one of our directors, and has purchased a good deal of land, knowing its value, like a shrewd man of business as he is.”

“Thank you,” returned the doctor, helping himself to some olives; “I don’t fancy such a neighbourhood would afford much of a practice. Still, let me have the prospectus.”

“I think you know our chairman,” said Mr. Harding—“Sir Frederic Pearson, an old Indian.”

“I have met him, poor old fellow! Does he still dabble in shares? He has been bitten too.”

“Ah, well! he is all right with us.”

“No doubt.”

Mr. Williams now turned the conversation by asking some questions about Indian matters, and having answered him, Brooke in his turn inquired as to Kharapet’s nationality.

“He is not a Mahometan, I see,” he added.

“No ; he is a Syrian Christian—a Nestorian, or some such thing. His brother was our Consul at Mardīn. A money-making old buffer ; scraped a decent lot together, and left it all to that good-looking girl upstairs. Our friend Kharapet is co-executor with myself, and inclined to go in for the property and the proprietress.”

Dr. Brooke made no reply, but a look of disgust crept over his dark grave face ; and Mr. Harding went on, “Kharapet is not a bad fellow, and a deuced sharp one ! He makes his way wonderfully with my Lord Saintsbury and Exeter Hall. A pious duchess pets him, and a couple of countesses coddle him. In short, if my pretty friend makes up her mind to give him herself and her money, she may float into swell society.”

“I fancy she would pay a high price for it,” returned the doctor carelessly.

“Ah ! you Indian officers are a little too hard on natives. Kharapet is a handsome fellow ; Lord bless you ! a man is a man to most women, no matter what his colour or creed. And Kharapet is a *bonâ fide* Christian.” Then, *à propos* of this profound remark, Mr. Harding proceeded with much chuckling and enjoyment to relate

one or two "good stories," not too delicate in their details, which Mr. Williams loudly applauded, while Dr. Brooke laughed a little contemptuously, the conversation which ensued being neither interesting nor edifying. Dr. Brooke rose and said he would join the ladies; on his departure Mr. Harding and his man of business immediately plunged into serious and absorbing conversation.

Brooke walked slowly upstairs, an undefined sensation of uneasiness and disgust crisping the current of his thoughts. He was himself above the average in ability, and endowed with all the qualities that fit a man for the profession he had adopted: closely observant, with nerves of steel, logical in thought, and possessed of an imagination sufficiently vivid to be the pioneer of discovery. Though no saint, he was a man of clean and active life. He had had a boyish fancy for his pretty cousin, which absence and occupation had so far obliterated that it pleased him to know she was well married. He was half amused at the tender gladness his meeting with her evoked. He did not think there was so much sentiment left in his practical nature. The first sight of

her face suggested doubt as to the happiness of her prosperity, and now his interest in her was rapidly deepening as he reflected on the horror of being indissolubly linked to such a man as her husband. "Does she feel it? Women are so mercifully endowed with the power of self-deception, a compensation for the blindness in which they grope about the world! How can any girl know the man she is going to marry? Not if she had been on speaking terms with him for years. Livy ought to have had a gentleman and a good fellow. This man is neither. I wish it had been possible to have kept her for myself, but of course the everlasting contradiction of things forbade that."

So thinking, Dr. Brooke opened the drawing-room door, and saw the object of his thoughts sitting at a small table pouring out tea. Kharapet was close beside her, speaking with earnestness in a low tone, and the new-comer fancied he read weariness and dislike in her cold, composed aspect.

At a little distance, comfortably ensconced in the corner of a sofa near the lamp, Stasie was reading so attentively that she did not look up when the door opened. Unconsciously piqued

by this inattention, Dr. Brooke, after receiving a cup of tea from his hostess, walked over to where she sat, and with a civil "May I venture to interrupt you?" took a place beside her.

"What is your study, Miss Verner?"

"Such a delightful book—quite different from anything I ever read before—Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*—do you know it?"

"I can't say I do. I have seen reviews of it, but that is all; works of imagination are not much in my line."

"But this is not a work of imagination," said Stasie, laying it open on her lap. "It is all about churches and cathedrals, and windows and columns—real, solid things."

"Still I think, unless I have formed a very false idea of the work, it is highly imaginative," he returned, with a smile at her earnestness and the slight hesitation that showed she was unaccustomed to put her graver thoughts into words. "Mr. Ruskin finds all sorts of meanings and intentions and laws in these fine old buildings and their decorations, which I am quite sure the builders were incapable not only of expressing but of conceiving."

“I do not like to hear you say so,” said Stasie, slowly and thoughtfully. “I cannot tell why, but I feel you are wrong. Perhaps these old builders, without knowing or intending, just worked their hearts and minds into the stones they were cutting or fastening together.”

“Very good, Miss Verner. I see you are quite competent to understand and appreciate Ruskin.”

“If you knew the delight he has given me, I think you would leave him alone.”

“I will ; he is sacred to me now,” returned Brooke, laughing gently, and looking down into the soft, dark, pleading eyes so seriously raised to his, with no small surprise that a mere school-girl should put so much heart into such a subject. “Nay, more, I will concede that there is always some character, some individuality in the work of men’s hands, so that the work of a Persian, a Hindoo, or a Chinaman, must differ widely.”

“Well, that is just what Ruskin says.”

“He goes much farther, I believe.”

“Do read the book ; I am sure you will be delighted with it, Dr. Brooke.”

“Very well, I will read it.”

A pause. Then Stasie began, with some

timidity, "Did you ever hear anything about the Rosicrucians when you were in India?"

"The Rosicrucians? What do you know about them?" asked Brooke, with increasing surprise.

"Oh, next to nothing—only what I have read in Bulwer's *Zanoni*."

"Do they allow Bulwer at your school, or is he a school classic?"

"Ah, no. I read some of his novels before I went to school. Are they not delightful?"

"Before you went to school! You must be very precocious! No. I am not very fond of Bulwer. He is too stilted and unreal."

Stasie raised her eyebrows with a look of mock despair, and persisted in her inquiry. "But did you ever hear anything about the Rosicrucians in India?"

"Nothing whatever. I cannot say I felt any interest in the subject."

"But there was such a sect or order?"

"No doubt—something of the nature of Freemasons or——"

"Will you not charm us with some of your sweet music, Stasie?" interrupted Hormuz,

coming softly up to where she sat. "I have not enjoyed it for more than a week."

"My music is not worth listening to, you must know it is not; and Dr. Brooke is just going to tell me some things I want to know," returned Stasie, with great candour and some impatience.

"I should much prefer listening to your voice than to my own, especially as I can give little or no information on the profound subjects which interest you."

Stasie coloured vividly for a moment as the idea that he was laughing at her presented itself. "If I thought my music could give you any pleasure I would play or sing at once; but I am a mere beginner——"

"To me it is divinely sweet," said Kharapet in a low voice. As he spoke the door opened to admit Mr. Harding and his remaining guest. "If you go and play now, Stasie, said Mrs. Harding from the tea-table, "you will help conversation, and no one will listen to you."

"Very well," returned Stasie good-humouredly, rising and moving towards the piano.

"What a curious incentive!" said Dr. Brooke, looking after her. Hormuz followed, but did not

attempt to open the piano or help her to find her music. He stood leaning on the instrument, gazing at the musician, who went quietly through her simple pieces very contentedly, while she observed that Mr. Harding and Mr. Williams continued some discussion begun before, coffee cups in hand, and Dr. Brooke went over to Mrs. Harding and soon seemed absorbed in talk with her.

“What were you speaking of to this stranger?” asked Kharapet at length, coming closer to Stasie. He looked less mild and smiling than usual.

“Oh, books and things you don’t care about.”

“I am not unlearned, Stasie. Do you know that I am consulted by some of your greatest men respecting Assyrian antiquities?”

“Oh, very likely! But do not talk to me while I am playing—it puts me out.”

Hormuz’s countenance darkened into a very ugly expression as he stood contemplating what was to his Eastern mind a problem not easy to solve—a woman, a mere girl, with an independent existence, who could tell him to be silent when he wished to talk—who was often quite unconscious of his gaze—and to whom, however incredible it might seem, he felt he could

not communicate the flame that consumed himself. After all, the slumber of her unawakened womanhood might account for this extraordinary indifference—northern women were slow to develop. If once he spoke to her, and poured out his love in the burning phrases he felt thronging to his lips, surely she would melt and tremble, and yield to his ardent affection.

“Was I very rude, Hormuz?” said Stasie, coming to the end of her piece and noting his downcast looks. “But I cannot play and talk.”

She smiled sweetly, archly, as she spoke, and before he could answer Mr. Harding called out, “Give us a song, Stasie.”

She complied at once, singing a Scotch ballad which she knew by ear.

Dr. Brooke came across to the piano when she ceased. “You really have a sweet, sympathetic voice,” he said; “much might be made of it.”

“I am glad you think so. I am going to have lessons.”

“Good-night, Miss Verner. I will not forget the opera.”

.
“I like your cousin Dr. Brooke so much,”

said Stasie to Mrs. Harding, as that lady turned into her young guest's room on her way to pay a last visit to the nursery before retiring for the night. "I am afraid he is satirical, but I am sure he is very clever."

"He is a man of ability, and *used to be* very nice and kind, but the world changes men greatly," returned Mrs. Harding with a sigh.

"At any rate he will take us to the opera, and that will be delightful. Mr. Harding does not mind, does he?"

"He would certainly have said so if he did," said his wife quietly.

Dr. Brooke, walking back through the dim, quiet streets to his hotel, reflected on the drama opening up to him in the glimpses he had caught of under-currents eddying round his former sweetheart. "Poor little Livy! I am afraid she is mated to a brute, and not even a straightforward brute! I don't fancy the legal adviser, either; and as to the Exeter Hall pet, I'd like to kick him when I see the fellow gloating over that nice, bright girl as if she were his particular property. They will never let her degrade herself by marrying the hound? Yet the fellow is good-

looking and soft-spoken; and what can a creature like Stasie Verner know of life? She is very handsome. What a sweet mouth!—not too small—and that look of perfect health in her fine velvety skin is a supreme beauty. Blondes are not much to my taste, but *she* is not insipid. I am not sure she isn't troublesomely intelligent; girls that ask questions are rather a nuisance, for it is ten to one if they understand your answers, unless they have been exceptionally trained. At any rate, it is pleasanter to go to the opera or any other haunt of fashion with two nice, bright women than alone, especially as I am quite free to dispense with them when I choose. My poor little Livy! I wish *she* could dispense with that prosperous, ostentatious husband of hers!"





CHAPTER IX.

THE days that intervened between this evening and the projected visit to the opera were both happy and successful in Stasie's estimation. She had broached the subject uppermost in her mind to Mr. Harding and to Kharapet, and to her delight it was not violently opposed. They promised to consider it, and that she should have an opportunity of speaking to her guardian—without whose consent nothing could be done. With this news Stasie flew to rejoice Aunt Clem's heart, but that sympathetic relative was "not at home," to her visitor's great regret. Still Lady Elizabeth Wyatt's promised invitation to luncheon did not come, though Kharapet, who was in greater request than ever with the fashionable religious world, brought numerous messages from that busy philanthropist to Stasie.

But the chief ingredient in this pleasant time

was the frequent society of Dr. Brooke. His conversation, his presence, acted like a delightful tonic on Stasie's brain. His voice charmed her ear ; his remarks, his incidental descriptions and reminiscences suggested fresh and invigorating strains of thought. His manner, frank, kindly, and utterly innocent of admiration or insinuated compliment, was delightful after the sugary sweetness of Kharapet or the rough adulation of Mr. Harding ; nor was she piqued or offended by finding herself unmistakably second to Mrs. Harding in his estimation, but rather more at her ease ; she showed her pleasure in his presence, her keen enjoyment in arguing with him even in accepting defeat at his hands without an attempt to disguise it.

It is not in male nature to be indifferent to such subtle unintentional flattery ; and Stasie was rapidly becoming a favourite in a sort of careless, half-appreciative fashion with her hero, though at times she unconsciously made his pulses throb quicker than they need, by her frank girlish playfulness—it could scarce be called coquetry—with Kharapet. Often, after she had been bored by the latter's persistent adoration,

which she scarce understood into impatience and sharp speeches, she would try to make amends by smiles and glances which both men misinterpreted, and which, with all his reason and philosophy, woke murderous thoughts in the cool self-possessed doctor.

He could not bear to doubt the straightforward earnestness which interested him so much in this half-educated half-wilful girl !

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The opera was like an enchanted dream to Stasia ; the only drawback was the presence of Kharapet, who joined them at the last moment, but that, too, was forgotten in the griefs of Leonora—the love and sorrow of Azucena. She would have liked Dr. Brooke's arm instead of Kharapet's coming out, but of course he (Dr. Brooke) took Mrs. Harding, and so darkness and commonplace settled down over the glorious revelation of beauty and melody, to be reproduced by fancy in the silence and freedom of her solitary moments.

The next afternoon's post brought her a note from Aunt Clem, written from her bed. The poor lady had been very ill with a bad feverish

cold. She was now better, and a visit from her sweet Stasie would complete her cure.

“I can go to-morrow, Mrs. Harding? there is nothing to be done?”

“Nothing! you had better see her at once, for Lady Elizabeth’s invitation may come any day, and you would not like to refuse.”

“Certainly not. And, Mrs. Harding, as you are going to take Johnnie to the dentist, I will stay at home and write a long letter to Ella Matthews—she will be so pleased to hear about the opera.”

Stasie therefore settled herself to her letter at Mrs. Harding’s writing-table in the inner drawing-room, but she did not get on. The music of last night was in her ears, its scenes before her eyes, and it seemed like a continuation of its delights, when Dr. Brooke was announced.

“I am so glad you have come! I want to talk to you about last night!” was her greeting. “But Mrs. Harding is out.”

“So I hear. Well, let us talk of last night by all means,” drawing a comfortable chair opposite her, and disposing himself at ease. “I am almost as new to such scenes as yourself.

I have been occasionally at the opera long ago, before I went to India. Grisi was at her highest height then! I do not think we will hear anything like her for a long time to come!"

"Oh! could she be finer than the Leonora last night?"

"Yes! infinitely, quite different."

"The only thing I don't think I liked was the recitative. It seems rather silly to talk in sing-song."

"For that matter it is all silly enough! yet very delicious. I am fond of music in an ignorant way, but I agree with you recitative is a mistake. I fancy the songs would have more effect if the dialogue were spoken."

"We must not quarrel though with what is so charming! How lovely that song 'Il balen del suo sorriso' is!"

"The lightning of thy smile," said Dr. Brooke, musingly. "Yes, there are smiles that flash upon one."

"They are not the best," returned Stasie. "I like Mrs. Harding's smiles, they are so soft and quiet, and—just a little sad—not sunny smiles! more like moonlight!" Dr. Brooke looked up

quickly, keenly, at her, but she did not notice him.

“You describe her exactly!” he said. “Where is she, by the way?”

“She has taken Johnnie to the dentist.”

“Ah! she’ll have a bad quarter of an hour! That young gentleman has not a heroic nature.

“*I* should think not,” returned Stasie emphatically. “He is such a troublesome imp, I do long to box his ears two or three times a day.”

“I doubt if the discipline would be judicious,” said the doctor gravely, while a smile glittered in his eyes.

“I daresay not, but he deserves it! I don’t think he cares one straw about his dear sweet mother!”

“You are very fond of Mrs. Harding? Do you never quarrel?”

“Never, though I am rather quarrelsome. I shall be so sorry to leave her.”

“Are you going away?” asked Brooke quickly.

“Not immediately, but I have almost got Mr. Harding’s and Mr. Kharapet’s consent that I should travel on the Continent for some time.”

"Almost! but a long way from 'altogether,' I suspect."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because that Eastern gentleman does not intend to lose sight of you if he can help it."

"Why?" asked Stasie, opening her eyes as if startled.

"Oh! for many reasons—lest you should spend too much money, for instance."

"But the money is my own, not his!"

"Well," with a smile and a curious look at her, "I daresay he has an abstract objection to spending, even though the money be not absolutely his. He is probably close-fisted by nature."

"I do not think he is—not to me. He tries to do every thing he can for me—pray do not say anything against him. I believe he is one of my kindest, best friends, though he has tiresome ways."

"That is an awful sentence! How is he tiresome?"

"I really cannot exactly tell, only he never seems to have much to say, and he does not care to talk about what interests me. But I am very

ungrateful to say this ; pray forget it, and let us speak of something else. I am very fond of Hormuz, I assure you."

"Very well, we will leave him. I am not disposed to dwell on the subject, I assure you. So you are not to go back to school? Are you not delighted?"

"Yes ; but I feel curiously adrift. Now Mrs. Mathews is gone, I seem to be quite alone."

Dr. Brooke looked at her to see if she thought of creating any sentimental effect by this speech, but her eyes were dreamy, with a sort of distant outlook, and her tone was as if she spoke to herself. There was something soft and wistful in her expression, an unconscious natural grace in her pose that touched his heart. She was, he feared, in the hands of unscrupulous men ; and she was so fearless and confiding, so innocent of guile. He did not admire fair women himself, and yet it flashed upon him that a man might love this unformed girl very passionately. "You resided with Mrs. Mathews since you were quite a child, I am told?"

"Oh, yes! that is the reason I miss being with them. But I have an aunt—that is, an

aunt of my mother's—and I hope I may be let to travel with her."

"I imagine you will always make plenty of friends," said Brooke kindly.

"Do you think so?" with a bright, grateful look. "Thank you." There was a silence—a pleasant, sympathetic silence.

Then the door opened, and Jane announced very audibly, "Mr. Mathews," whereupon entered a slight, short young man with a pale, pasty face, ill-developed moustaches, and untidy hair. He wore a light paletot, deficient in one or two buttons and relaxed about the pockets. He held a short stick and his hat in one hand, and made his entry with an air of mingled awkwardness and swagger.

Stasie looked up at him for an instant with—what seemed to Brooke's fully roused curiosity—not pleased surprise; then her brow cleared, and she started up exclaiming, "Bob! why, what has brought you here? I am very glad to see you!"

"Well, I thought I would just call round and see you. I was not at home the day you were over at our place, and——" he stopped, with an uneasy glance at Dr. Brooke.

“Sit down, Bob,” resumed Stasie. “When did you hear from your mother, and how are they getting on?”

“I had a letter yesterday; they are all stunning, thanks, and awfully busy.”

“And are you going down to C——?”

“I don’t know—at any rate, not yet.”

“Are you still with Mrs. Deacon?”

“Yes; it’s cruelly slow. I wanted to tell you about one or two things.”

Here Dr. Brooke rose. Stasie had in her surprise and confusion quite forgotten him. “I will wish you good-morning,” he said. “Tell Mrs. Harding I shall look in to-morrow or next day to see how she is after her trials of this morning.” A low bow to Stasie, a slight one to Bob, and he was gone.

“That is a good riddance,” said Bob, with a sigh of relief. “Who is he?”

“Dr. Brooke, a cousin of Mrs. Harding’s.”

“Ah! he is not to be taken alive, I should say.” Another pause.

“Now then, Bob, what is it?” You have something to tell me?”

“You are about right, Stasie; I am in a regular hole.”

"You generally are," she returned, leaning her elbows on the table, and supporting her chin on her hands.

"Yes, but this is out and out the worst, because I was just going to be steady. I had just got my first chance, and a couple of scoundrels that hold some bits of paper of mine swear they will nab me if I don't pay up, and they might as well ask me for the national debt!"

"Tell me all about it, Bob, for I do not understand."

Whereupon Bob did a tale unfold, by which it appeared that when the family exodus was decided upon, there was a great difficulty what to do with him; and by his own account he began at last to feel ashamed of being a drag and a burden on his mother. He therefore bestirred himself, and succeeded in obtaining an engagement for a voyage to Shanghai and back.

Mrs. Mathews had managed to pay off a few of her son's small debts,—all she was aware of,—a great strain upon her slender resources. Bob confessed that he had hoped to escape his larger creditors, but unfortunately the date of the ship's departure was postponed. The creditors got scent

of his intentions, and informed him that they were determined to have their money.

“In fact they never lose sight of me,” concluded Bob. “I should have been in quod by this time, only they let me go about to try and scrape up the cash.”

“This is dreadful !” exclaimed Stasie, full of warmest sympathy with Mrs. Mathews and Ella. “Oh, Bob, Bob ! what a boy you are, and what a trouble you have been ! oughtn’t you to be ashamed of yourself ? What is to become of you ?”

“That’s just what I have come to ask you,” returned Bob, looking very straight at her. “Don’t you kick a fellow that’s down, but help to put him on his legs. You’ve lots of tin. Couldn’t you manage to lend me forty or fifty pounds for my mother’s sake ? You’d just save me and make my fortune. I’ll pay you again, as sure as I am a living man !”

“I am not so sure, though,” said Stasie, with much candour. “Not that I would mind much whether you did or not—for your mother’s sake Bob—but I can’t—I can’t indeed. I have hardly any money at all ; and I shall not have any till I am twenty-one.”

“ But, Stasie,” urged the young man imploringly, “ you live among swell monied people, couldn’t you coax a trifle like fifty out of any of them ? Don’t be hard on me, Stasie. You and I were always good friends. Many’s the pound of toffy we have made together ; many a bull’s-eye I have given you ; and many’s the time I have pulled the swing for you till my arm ached ! ”

“ And tried to throw me out, and break my neck too,” said Stasie, laughing. “ No, Bob, don’t talk nonsense ; we never were friends ! You were always selfish ; and, I must say it, rather unprincipled. Yet, as I said, I wouldn’t mind one bit if I could help you, and, after all, you may come right yet. You have some good somewhere, I suppose, you manage to make your poor mother love you so much.”

“ She does,” said Bob, a little huskily ; “ and if I can get over this I’ll be a good son to her ; see if I’m not.”

Stasie looked fixedly at him, and seemed lost in thought. “ If I thought you would be ! ”

Bob broke out into the strongest asseverations, and Stasie recounted to him the abortive attempt

she had made to induce the executors to give her a hundred pounds of her own money. While she spoke, and noticed the dull despair that crept over Bob's face, her indignation against her enforced impotence, and a growing belief that Bob was not hopeless, waxed strong in her heart.

"I think I'll just go jump off Westminster Bridge," said Bob despondingly. Stasie still kept silence, but her face was beginning to brighten. "Bob," she said, at last, "if you will really try to be a good son, and a well-behaved gentleman, I'll do the only thing I can, I will give you some of my trinkets."

"You are a real brick, Stasie," he returned, not very cheerfully; "but I am afraid a few trinkets won't do much good."

"I have more than you think; stay, I will show them to you; but we must be quick, no one must see them about."

She ran out of the room, and soon returned with her jewel-box, the contents of which she displayed to the admiring Bob.

"My eye!" said that young man, "you have a heap of sparklers there. Why, Stasie, my darling! you'll save me; you'll make my fortune;

you'll give me a chance for life if you let me have some of these."

"Only some of them, then! and, indeed, Bob, I don't like to part with any of them; they were all my poor mother's."

"But you need not!" cried Bob eagerly; "I'll pledge them with some highly respectable uncle, and when I come back from Shanghai I'll take 'em out, see if I don't."

"You mean you will pawn them? I remember how you pawned Mrs. Mathews' diamond ring! but she had to pay for it before she got it again!"

"And what a trump she was about it. I got ten pounds on it—there's many ten pounds there."

"I don't know," said Stasie, doubtfully; "I can't give this, or this, or this," pointing to the gold ornaments, a bracelet, a clasp or two, etc. etc.

"Well," cried Bob, "I am sure there's sixty or seventy pound's worth left if we go judiciously to work. If you give them to me you'll see how I'll manage, and I'll bring you back what's not wanted, faith and honour."

"No, Bob," said Stasie steadily, "I will not let them out of my own hands. I will go with

you and see what we can get. If there is anything over I want it for myself."

Bob coloured. "I think you might trust me," he said, "and I don't think you will like going into these kind of places."

"Why should I mind? I am not doing wrong! I am only taking my own, though I shall keep it secret as long as ever I can. Of course there will be an awful row about it, for it will be sure to be found out, but you will be away and the money gone; and, Bob, if you are not steady and industrious after this, I'll—I'll say you are no gentleman, but a thief!"

"Don't call names," said Bob, too infinitely relieved to take offence, "but how shall we manage?" Stasie thought for a minute. "We must try and do it to-morrow," she said; "I am going to see aunt Clem—Miss Stretton, you know. If you can meet me somewhere near these places, we can dispose of the things, and I will go on to her after."

"Capital! first rate; better meet as near as possible, corner of Edgeware Road and Cambridge Terrace? You know the place. Will two o'clock suit?"

"Yes, quite well; and go away now, Bob, please. I want to put away my pretty things, and I don't want you to meet Mrs. Harding."

"I suppose you're ashamed of a shabby friend," said Bob.

"If it was only shabbiness of clothes I would not mind, but you know it has been shabbiness all through, Bob. Yet, I begin to hope there's more good in you than I thought. Oh! if you turn out well, how proud I shall be of you!"

.

It was not without a struggle that Stasie had made up her mind to part with her trinkets even temporarily, but the hope of helping the family through the family incubus was tempting; and though deeply distrustful of the erratic Bob, he had on this occasion contrived to inspire her with an unusual degree of faith. Moreover, it was, as he said, his first chance, and if he lost it he might never come right.

As to any doubt respecting the disposal of what was her own, any hesitation as to the propriety of walking about with Bob, to whom she had been used all her life, such considerations never crossed her brain, and she enjoyed

the idea of helping Mrs. Mathews indirectly, in spite of guardian or executors. She sent off her letter to Ella without saying a word of her prodigal brother, and started next day as soon as possible after luncheon on her circuitous route to Aunt Clem.

Of course Bob was punctually in waiting, and greeted her with a grateful exclamation of "Well, Stasie, you are a trump!" He further proposed the daring extravagance of a cab. "It will save time, and you will be seen less," he said. "I suppose the swells you live amongst would be shocked to see you going about with a young man?"

"Not a young man that is like a sort of brother," returned Stasie, whose bourgeois upbringing left her in some ignorance of the conventionalities of higher life.

"Still, it is as well to keep out of sight if you want to keep this business dark," urged Bob, as he hailed a four-wheeler.

He directed the driver to the Strand, and, arrived there, he dismissed the conveyance. "There are lots of first-rate 'uncles' about here," he observed, "and I will just put up my umbrella to keep off this nasty drizzle, and curious eyes."

It was, as Bob remarked, a nasty, damp, oppressive day ; the streets were greasy, the footways dirty, a sort of atmosphere that suited their shady proceedings, Stasie thought. She was not prepared for the sort of shame and disgust which abashed her, when she stood in one of those dingy little sentry-box divisions by which the *incognito* and delicacy of applicants for avuncular aid are supposed to be preserved. A faint doubt as to whether she was right presented itself, but was quickly banished. By Bob's advice she had made up her jewels into various small parcels. "It will never do to show all at once," said that experienced youth. This compelled a prolongation of Stasie's discomfort, as they were obliged to visit many establishments before they collected the sum required by Bob, and a balance which Stasie appropriated.

"I had better leave all the tickets with you," said Bob considerately, when the last bracelet was disposed of, and they stood in the entry of one of the grandest institutions they had yet visited. "I might lose them, you know, moving about. Isn't this a swell place? I might be buying a suit of diamonds for my 'young lady,' from the

looks of it," he continued, unable to repress the bounding high spirits which this great deliverance inspired.

"If you ever did buy such things you would be sure to pawn them next day," said Stasie. She felt cross and vexed both with Bob and herself.

They stepped into the street as she spoke, turning towards Westminster.

"I do not see why it should be more disgraceful to raise money on rings and pins, or even a tail-coat, than on your hereditary estate or your scrip and securities," said Bob philosophically, while he struggled to open his umbrella. But Stasie neither heard nor heeded him. That unsheltered moment brought her face to face with Dr. Brooke. They did not speak, and he passed on without the slightest hesitation. Yet Stasie saw that she was recognised, that her companion was recognised, and that Dr. Brooke thought it well not to see her. Bob, engaged with his umbrella, saw nothing. Stasie, her conscience clear of offence, was puzzled by this cut direct. She would not have hesitated to give the fullest explanation of her presence,—only for Mrs. Mathews' sake she would not like to dis-

play Bob's delinquencies too openly. Still, the *rencontre* made her uncomfortable. She would take the first opportunity to tell everything to Dr. Brooke; it would be a relief. She was determined not to say a word to Mrs. Harding, lest in the row which she fully anticipated she should be in any way implicated. But would it not be taking a liberty to thrust her affairs on a stranger? She would wait and see if an opportunity for speaking offered.

"Get me a cab, Bob!" she exclaimed, interrupting the flow of his talk. "I must go to Miss Stretton's as soon as I can, or I shall have no time to spend with her."

Stasie was feeling shivery and miserable, and longed for her aunt's caressing words and tone of admiration.

"All right; and I will bid you good-bye now. I daresay it won't break your heart not to see me again. Wait a bit, Stasie; I'll show you I'm not an ungrateful scoundrel! Have you the tickets safe?"

"I have. But stay, Bob; are we not near some nice fruit shop, or Covent Garden? I want to get some fruit for my aunt; she has been ill."

“To be sure, there is a fruiterer’s over the way.”

“But what an awful place to cross!”

“Stick to me. I’ll take care of you!”

.

There is no more desolate creature in the world than an elderly decayed gentlewoman of Miss Stretton’s type.

Kindly, weak, vain, sensitive, and not over brave, she was apt to irritate the young people under her charge by pretensions she had not the pluck to uphold; to excite their mockery by little transparent deceits, at which the cruel hardness of youth will not smile indulgently, and to “rile” them by cutting speeches for which she was only too ready to apologise. In short, she had not the knack of making friends, albeit capable of much good nature as well as a little spite.

Being of an essentially religious caste of mind, she was inclined to see the finger of Providence in the misfortunes of those she disliked and the success of those who had befriended her, and she considered her introduction to Stasie the direct guiding of a merciful Father.

The inopportune cold, which had been nearly

a fever, and which interrupted her communications with her niece, was a great blow, as she was most anxious to make good her footing with the young heiress and her directors. Here, indeed, was a chance not to be neglected, and she was laid up helpless, unable to improve it!

Trained as she had been, poor soul,—in the conviction that young people were selfish, and the only way to get on was to avoid troubling or crossing them, it never occurred to her to write to Stasie to come and nurse her, an employment Stasie would have rather enjoyed. So when that young person beamed in upon her, on the dull, damp, depressing afternoon we have described, with a basket of grapes, apricots, and a big nosegay of sweet flowers, she seemed an angel of hope and deliverance to the poor solitary woman.

Weakened as she was by illness, she thanked Stasie with hysterical tears, which made a great impression on her visitor. Had Miss Stretton planned for a twelvemonth the best method of attracting and attaching her young niece, she could have hit on no device so certain of success as this unmistakably natural outburst of feeling.

“Now, don’t cry, Aunt Clem. I won’t have it. You are not going to be lonely any more. I have spoken to Mr. Harding and to Hormuz Kharapet, and they have all but consented to my going abroad with you. Indeed they cannot do more until I see Mr. Wyatt. He, you know, must decide, and I don’t believe he cares a straw what becomes of me. So you must try and get well, for we might go abroad this autumn. Let me peel this apricot for you, and have you any wine? I am sure you ought to have some wine.”

“There is a little, dear, in the cupboard by the fireplace.”

Stasie had it out in a twinkling. “Why, there is scarcely a glass left,” finding one and pouring out the muddy port, then colouring from fear of seeming to presume, “Might I—would you mind if I sent out for some more? you know it is a mere trifle.”

“Ah, Stasie, you are your dear mother’s own daughter. The good God has sent you to console me for the sorrows and disappointments of my life. Yes, love, I will accept your kindness, and it is three-e-e and”—sob—“sixpence a bottle.”

After this some delightful conversation ensued. An extensive tour was planned, a tremendous scheme of study sketched out for Stasie, and various details suggested and discussed, till, to the surprise of the friends in council, they found it was nearly six o'clock. "I must run away," cried Stasie, "I shall be late for dinner."

"You take my sunshine with you, dear. When shall I see you again?"

"Not for a few days. I am going to write boldly to Mr. Wyatt and ask for an interview. I get nothing done unless I do it myself. Mr. Harding promises everything and does nothing. I suppose there is no harm in writing to my guardian?"

"None whatever, and, Stasie, be sure you get him on our side. I may say our side, my love? For, believe me that Mr. Kharapet will make a determined resistance to your leaving England."

"I don't think he will, Aunt Clem. He is always ready to do what I wish, and really does the things—not merely promises, like Mr. Harding."

"Nevertheless, when it comes to travelling

abroad, you will find him the greatest difficulty, unless, *indeed*, he comes with you"—a keen look at her listener with these words.

But Stasie neither understood nor heeded. "Oh, I should not care for that. He is very nice and good-natured, but he would be rather in our way. He—he does not understand things, or care about art or—— But I must run away. Good-bye, dear aunt; I will come again as soon as ever I can."

"God bless you, my sweet child! I shall count the days till we meet again."

.

It was late when Stasie drove up to Mrs. Harding's, and she went straight away to her room. She dressed quickly, thinking over her day's work with delight and amusement. She had helped Mrs. Mathews most effectually in helping Bob; she had secured nearly twelve pounds for a wedding present to dear Ella; she had completely turned the executors' flank, which was a glorious triumph, and, above all, she had cheered and comforted poor Aunt Clem, who was the only creature to whom she (Stasie) could possibly be of importance and use. "And

please God, I *will* help her and stick to her," said Stasie to herself resolutely. There would be a row, and a very big row, when her delinquencies were found out; *that* she did not care about, provided the discovery were not made too soon. Once Bob was safe away, detection might come when it would. But how if Dr. Brooke, who would probably come to dinner to-morrow or next day, made any uncomfortable inquiries about her expedition to the Strand? that was a danger against which she must guard. She stood still a moment lost in thought. Would he not think her bold and unmaidenly if she wrote to him, a comparative stranger? Very likely he would; yet she must stop his mouth at all costs. By and by, when the clearing-up came, she would explain all to him, and he would quite understand. She would not for worlds he thought ill of her, he was such a grand, kindly man, worthy of being a Rosicrucian himself. Now time pressed; she must write shortly. She opened her blotting-book, wrote a hasty line, signed, sealed, and delivered it to the nursemaid, whom she caught going downstairs, who, noticing the address, and

being utterly devoted to Miss Verner, scented a prosperous love affair, and posted it with the utmost secrecy, not even confiding a syllable of her conjectures to her ally the kitchen-maid.





CHAPTER X.

THIS same dull drizzling day Dr. Brooke dined with an eminent M.D. whose pupil he had been. It was a man's party (the M.D. was a bachelor)—and a very pleasant one—wit and humour, culture, and knowledge of life, are splendid additions to a material feast, and Brooke returned to his hotel, highly pleased with the entertainment. He felt enriched and enlightened, his own powers roused, his faculties put upon their mettle, as such intercourse is wont to affect those who have been for long strangers to similar influences.

London was certainly the most desirable field in which a man of science and ambition could labour. It was so crowded, though! How could he hope to secure a niche in a fane bedecked with multitudes of striking figures? Was there an unoccupied spot left for him? Yes! he might find it *if* he could afford to wait; he was still

young, but his capital was small; yet give him time, and he felt he would make a place for himself. He was sure of his own industry and confident in his own power, with the calm of certainty, which is so widely different from the restlessness of self-conceit.

In this pleasant frame of mind he reached his room, and putting on his dressing-gown resolved, as he felt so wide awake, to write a long letter to a regimental chum. He drew his chair to the table, lit a cigar, and then proceeded to open two or three notes given to him as he came in.

One was a bill; in the next Lady Pearson informed him she was at home on the evening of the 30th, while "dancing," in diminutive letters at one corner, indicated the amusement proposed; the last was a plain white envelope, directed in large, clear, rather straggly, writing, quite unknown to him, too bold for a woman, too undecided for a man. "Whom can this be from," he murmured, gazing on the superscription—"Dr. J. Brooke, Grosvenor Hotel." Then with a smile at the stupidity of conjecturing, when he had but to tear the envelope and know, Brooke opened it and read, "Dear Dr. Brooke, please do

not tell any one you met me in the Strand to-day. Yours truly, STASIE VERNER."

Brooke threw down the paper impatiently. He felt as if some discordant note had jarred upon the pleasant harmony of spirit in which he had sat down to peruse this brief epistle.

He had remarked Stasie and her companion, but was not sure they had seen him. It had in some way offended him to see her out alone with so objectionable a young man as "Bob;" but he did not think much about it, intending to give Mrs. Harding a hint that she ought not to permit her young friend to go about under such escort.

Now, the matter took a different colour altogether. There must have been some deliberate purpose in Stasie's expedition, perhaps some old entanglement. Good heavens! what extraordinary creatures girls are. What strange fascination he had known coarse, common, brutal men exercise over gentle, refined, lady-like girls! Titania and Bottom in an ever-recurring drama! But somehow he had fancied that Stasie was of different calibre; her tastes, her struggling desire for higher things, seemed to point to a different

ending. To make clandestine appointments with an unmitigated cad, and then to write coolly to himself, a comparative stranger, to hold his tongue respecting her doings, showed a mixture of cunning and effrontery that—Pah! why should he think of it any more? what was this girl to him? She was a thorough coquette, and the memory of sundry soft glances and speeches to Kharapet came back to him—speeches and glances, by the way, generally bestowed after having cut the Syrian short when he attempted to interrupt her conversation with himself (Jim Brooke). Yet what a fine creature she is! was Brooke's concluding reflection. "None of your regular beauties—but lovely! Such a figure! so rich and graceful! and those clear, fearless eyes, so unconscious and careless at times of self and her own charm, though I daresay she knows right well she is good-looking. She will be a sort of woman that men make fools of themselves for. I am glad I have had a glimpse of the under-current! There is Livy, too, Mrs. Harding! How did she come to marry such a clown? but I fancy the old Rector had a hand in that! What an upside-down world it is! I

do not see why a fellow should not get on quite well without a wife."

Having come to this wise conclusion, he tore poor Stasie's little note into minute fragments, and settled to his letter, effectually dismissing the matter from his mind.

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The day but one after Dr. Brooke had made these profound reflections, he left his club early in the afternoon, and walked forth in some uncertainty as to how he should spend the next hour or two; he found himself almost unconsciously following the streets and turns which led to York Gate. He was due there, he told himself. He had not seen Mrs. Harding for some days, and she was such a pleasant, quiet little thing to talk to! in fact his cousin and her friend were rather amusing studies to him. Nor need he renounce his study, because one of them developed new and disagreeable characteristics.

Mrs. Harding was at home. She was teaching her little girl to work a kettle-holder, the little lady's first attempt at fancy-work.

The day was warm and sunny, so the transition from the sultry streets to a shady room, cool

and quiet, and sweet with the perfume of violets and mignonette, was very grateful to the pedestrian.

“What are you doing, Miss Ethel?” said Brooke after the first greetings were exchanged.

“Making a pretty holder for mamma,” returned the child, bringing it up for inspection. “Shall I make one for you?”

“Yes; I shall want it for my house when I have one.”

“When shall you have one?”

“I don’t know—by the way, your friend Mr. Williams, Livy, is quite ready to settle the important question of residence and practice for me. I am to buy or build a house at Sefton Park, and assume the sanitary direction of the inhabitants.”

“At Sefton Park!” echoed Mrs. Harding; “well, I presume you will *look* at the place first before coming to a decision.” She spoke with a slight smile.

“Your tone is not encouraging. Pray what is your opinion of the locality?”

“It is not disagreeable in summer, but I think you would like a wider sphere. However, you will judge for yourself. We have a house there, the original farmhouse, and will be going down

to it in a fortnight or three weeks. I hope you will come and see us."

"I shall be delighted."

"There is an orchard there, and I have a garden of my own too," said Ethel.

"It must be an Eden," returned Brooke, taking her on his knee.

"I shall be glad enough to go out of town," said Mrs. Harding. "It is fresh and countrified as yet at Sefton Park; later it will be too much of the suburban villa order."

Ethel continued to tell of ponies, cows, and fowls, of nutting and blackberrying, while Brooke played with her golden hair, when their discourse was broken in upon by the entrance of the eldest boy, followed by a staid, solid-looking woman. "Mamma!" cried Johnnie, rushing up to his mother, "must I go with nurse? I want to go with Harry Middleton into the enclosure. He has a new boat, and ——"

"The last day as you went out with Master Middleton, sir, you come in with your feet sopping wet, and your clothes in tatters," said nurse.

"You had better go with nurse and the children, Johnnie."

“No, I won’t! why should I? I’m not a baby!”

“If he comes with us, I can have an eye on him, ma’am.”

“I don’t want her eyes!” cried Johnnie.

“You really had better go with nurse, Johnnie, and you must,” said Mrs. Harding.

“Well, I won’t, there now! Papa says you never know what’s best, that you blow hot and cold, and *he* won’t mind if I do go with Harry.” So saying, he darted away, slamming the door.

“Never you mind, ma’am; I’ll see after him,” said nurse hastily, and she left the room followed by Willie and Ethel.

There was an awkward pause. Mrs. Harding had flushed crimson, feeling that her boy’s words were a painful revelation. Dr. Brooke felt as if a panorama of his cousin’s life had been suddenly unrolled, and for a moment could find no words wherewith to recommence the conversation.

Mrs. Harding was the first to speak. With a slight smile curling her lips she said: “A specimen of judicious up-bringing, is he not? We must hope years will improve him.”

"Get him to school as fast as you can," replied Brooke.

"Let us talk of some pleasanter matters," rejoined Mrs. Harding, recovering herself. "Stasie Verner is out; she is gone to luncheon with Lady Elizabeth Wyatt—gone in high spirits, poor child! hoping to get her guardian's consent to her scheme of continental travel under the chaperonage of her aunt, Miss Stretton."

"Don't you think she will succeed?"

"I doubt it. Mr. Harding and Mr. Kharapet are, for some reason, not inclined to let her go."

She paused as if expecting some question from her companion, but he only said, "Indeed."

"I think it would do her a great deal of good. I do not know that Miss Stretton is the best person to be with her; she seems very kind and complaisant, and Stasie seems to have taken a fancy to her. She has been ill, and Stasie spent nearly all the day before yesterday in her dull room—not a very enlivening occupation for a young girl! and Miss Stretton is almost a stranger to her."

"It was remarkably kind," replied Dr. Brooke drily.

“ I think it was,” said Mrs. Harding, a little struck by his tone. He had generally spoken of Stasie with a certain degree of interest, and Mrs. Harding, whose heart had warmed to him from the first time he had presented himself, hoped he might prove a useful counterpoise to Kharapet; in short, she had begun to think it would be a good arrangement if Dr. Brooke were to marry Stasie. He seemed likely to make a kind husband, *if* any man could be steadily kind and courteous when possessed of a husband’s irresponsible power. And *her* money would be most useful to him in the outset of his career.

Mrs. Harding was a woman of too much tact and delicacy of feeling to show her hand in such an affair. She only held herself in readiness, gently to fan any kindling spark she might perceive on her cousin’s side; and something in his voice to-day told her he was unsympathetic. Perhaps he thought Stasie responded too readily to Kharapet’s unconcealed admiration, his sickly but unmistakable passion; so she continued quietly keeping her eyes on her tatting. “ I should be sorry to lose her, yet glad if she did go abroad, were it only to get her out of Mr. Kharapet’s way.

I suppose it is mere prejudice, but I have an unaccountable dislike to him ; and it would grieve me more than I can say if he succeeded in winning Stasie—not that I really think he has much chance !”

“She does not seem inclined to be hard-hearted,” returned Dr. Brooke in the same tone.

“You do not understand her as I do,” said Mrs. Harding earnestly. “She has some surface vanity, and she is pleased and amused by Khara-pet’s flattering devotion, but utterly unconscious of the reality of his plans and intentions. I am certain his proposal, when it comes, will be a surprise to her. Her mind is full of other things. She has no idea of falling in love, and she feels a certain superiority to him. Both these mental conditions make her deaf and blind to what you and I see. I only hope when she refuses him he may not turn into a spiteful enemy ; so I should much prefer her going abroad with Miss Stretton out of harm’s way.”

“You are a very far-seeing observant little woman,” replied Brooke, laughing ; “and I congratulate Miss Verner on having so faithful a friend. I think you are highly imaginative, Livy.

Were I you, I should not distress myself about Miss Verner ; she is a bright, handsome creature, with a sufficient dash of coquetry ; she will manage Kharapet and two or three more, I daresay, before she makes some fellow happy with herself and her money."

Mrs. Harding was silent. She had too much experience of what she considered the crookedness of masculine nature to pursue the subject. Some influence unknown to her was at work, and³ she must watch and wait. Perhaps Brooke expected an eager reply, for he looked at her attentively ; but her shuttle was entangled, and when she had put it right, she said in her usual tone—

"Are you going to Lady Pearson's on the 30th?"

"Are *you*?"

"Yes, I am going to take Stasie, who never was at a dance as yet?"

"Then I will go, and you must dance with me for 'auld lang syne's' sake!"

"My dear Jim, I forget how to dance. I never go to anything but dinners—stately regulation dinners!"

"Why not? Is Harding jealous? Doesn't he like you to dance?"

“Jealous! Mr. Harding jealous!” She laughed quite merrily. “He never dreams of such fancies. He is not imaginative enough. No; he hates evening parties, and does not like to be left alone.”

“I fancy you give in to him too much, Livy.”

“You will be quite as exacting yourself, Jim, when you marry.”

“Perhaps so,” he returned thoughtfully; “and I suppose I must marry?”

“I see no necessity—no urgent necessity if you do not care about it.”

“I am not sure that I do. It is very pleasant to talk about oneself to a wise woman like *you*, but I have observed that wives are not always interested in their husband’s confidences.”

“How do you know what husbands and wives are *tête-à-tête*?”

“True. I think, by and by, when I have amused myself and decided on my future plans, I shall look out for a wife, a nice, sensible, practical woman with a little money.”

“I suppose you would never be guilty of the weakness of falling in love?” said Mrs. Harding, laughing.

“N—o; not if I can help it. Do you know

I was deucedly miserable when I bade *you* good-bye, and felt it was final!" He threw a wonderful amount of tenderness into his eyes as he spoke.

"Did you really?" and Mrs. Harding laughed again. "No one would have found it out! and it was just as well we were separated. You are an ambitious man, Jim, and had you felt me or any other woman a drag——well, it would not have been pleasant for the drag."

"You are wrong, Livy! I hope I am strong enough to bear the inevitable without whimpering, and I do not think I should be a brute to any woman."

"I don't think you would; but I imagine you might be bitterly indifferent."

"Indifference is not bitter," he said, with some surprise at her tone.

"Bitter to bear," I mean.

Another silence. Dr. Brooke found himself longing to say, "Livy, are you very unhappy? can I do anything to help you?" but he dared not. That she was not happy seemed clear enough; the only question was as to the degree of her unhappiness; her hint in their first interview

that all married women were the better for a "big brother" relative of some kind was very expressive—that and her eldest boy's insolence told much. Jim Brooke had a kinder heart than he himself knew. He had a large knowledge of the world's seamy side,—none see so much behind the scenes as doctors, for whom poor humanity is generally in *déshabille*,—and he felt that his years were too few, his relationship too remote, to permit of his playing champion for his interesting little cousin; besides, until you knew them well, it was not easy to fathom women. God knows what was at the bottom of Livy's unhappiness, yet he was inclined to believe her real, simple, truthful,—as to her young *protégée* she had managed to throw dust in her friend's eyes very successfully. Mrs. Harding had evidently no notion how she had occupied the hours supposed to have been spent in Miss Stretton's sick-room. "What a daring, cool hand she must be! fresh from school too! The whole group at York Gate was worth a little study, and amongst the individuals that composed it how immeasurably superior his former sweetheart appeared—so gentle, so delicate, so composed, no unfeminine

daring, no bold stratagems, about her. What a lucky fellow that Harding is!" he mused, while his companion tatted in silence. "If he should happen to break his neck I shall certainly try my chance with his charming widow."

Still a sort of unrecognised regret that his idea of Stasie Verner, as an original *piquante* specimen of girlhood, had resolved itself into a reality of common-place intrigue and coquetry, irritated and annoyed him more than he was aware.

"I shall be going out of town myself soon," he said at length. "I suppose I shall find you settled at Sefton Park when I return?"

"Yes; we generally stay there till November, and hope you will run down and see us often. We live somewhat in the rough there. We have an old farmhouse to which Mr. Harding has made a few additions, and it is very homely and pleasant. Nothing to take care of in short, which is an immense relief."

"I should think so. English women seem to me rather heavily taxed for their high-toned existence here. They lead gloriously free lives in India—everything done for them."

"I should not object to a fair amount of care

and trouble," said Mrs. Harding with a slight sigh ; " but to pass one's whole time preserving porcelain from chips and sideboards from scratches is not exhilarating."

" I should think not," returned Brooke, laughing. " Well, I suppose I must say good-morning. I have been paying you a visitation."

" I am very glad to have a talk with you. If you wait a little perhaps Stasie will return."

" Or, better still—put on your bonnet and come out for a stroll in the Botanic Garden. There is a cricket match or some such thing on at Lord's, and we will have the place to ourselves."

" Yes, I will come, if you don't mind substituting the enclosure for the Gardens, and then I can see the little ones."

" Your young barbarians all at play! Very well, it is the same to me. I have not grown used to this strange feeling of having no particular occupation, and I am very grateful when you permit me to bestow my tediousness upon you."

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Meanwhile Stasie had succeeded, as she thought, remarkably well at the long-expected luncheon. She was less overpowered by the consciousness

of her own ignorance and insufficiency than on the occasion of her first visit, which she had so feelingly described to Ella Mathews. To-day she was in high spirits—she had had a bright, happy letter from her friend and schoolfellow announcing the delightful fact that Bob had succeeded in finding employment, a great weight being thus lifted from his mother's shoulders ; and winding up with a full account of her own and her *fiancé's* plans and projects.

Lady Elizabeth received her husband's ward in her morning-room. She was writing busily at a table covered with letters, papers, and pamphlets, and looked so pale and wrinkled that she might have been at work all night from her appearance.

“ Ah, Miss Verner ! Very glad to see you. Are you not early ? ” looking at her watch. “ I protest it is one o'clock ! I had no idea it was so late. Sit down, my dear, and tell me all about yourself. How is Mrs. Harding ? Very nice woman indeed—so *posée* and well-bred—quite wonderful ! Who was she ? ”

“ She was a Miss Rivers ; her father was rector of some place in Herefordshire. ”

“ Ah, indeed ! Then she was a gentlewoman. And what have you been doing ? Any parties ? I hope Mrs. Harding has taken you to hear some of Professor Holzenkopf’s lectures on Hieroglyphics. You really ought to hear him—(may I trouble you to ring the bell)—the enormous development of discovery in these days requires the utmost—Oh, Roberts, has Mr. Wyatt come in yet ?” as the footman appeared.

“ No, my lady. Lord Cecil Annesley is in the drawing-room, my lady.”

“ Oh, indeed ! We must go to luncheon, then. I shall not wait for Mr. Wyatt, Roberts.” To Stasie, “ He is so overwhelmed with work about the middle of the session that he has hardly time to eat or sleep. I tell him he undertakes too much. Come into the drawing-room, Miss Verner. Lord Cecil is a very interesting person. He made a voyage down the Euphrates on a raft with Mr. Wyatt at the time your friend Kharapet was his interpreter—charming person Kharapet ! He is engaged at present in translating a little volume of poems I published about a year ago into Arabic, for the use of schools we hope to establish in Turkish Arabia. Such a universal

genius! I told Mr. Wyatt to bring him in to luncheon. Lord Cecil will be delighted to see him."

"But," said Stasie, snatching at a brief opportunity when Lady Elizabeth paused to take breath, "but I wanted so much to speak to Mr. Wyatt and yourself alone. I want his consent to a plan I have made to travel on the continent—to——"

"To travel abroad," interrupted her ladyship as she walked quickly towards the drawing-room, which was at the opposite side of a large lobby or landing. "A very good idea! It would improve you immensely. Whom would you travel with?—that is the question. I should not mind taking you with us to Rome next winter if we go there. Your whole future depends on being well introduced."

Stasie's heart sank at this sentence. It would be all very well for her, but how about Aunt Clem? Meantime, having reached the drawing-room, Lady Elizabeth was rushing into a fresh speech.

"How d'you do, Lord Cecil? How d'you do? Have I kept you waiting? Mr. Wyatt will be

here directly. Let me present you to Miss Verner, a ward of Mr. Wyatt's. I am sure you must have known her father at Mardin—a delightful old man from Mr. Wyatt's account. Consul Kharapet—excellent, enlightened man!—left this dear child all his money. She ought to aid us in our work of raising the women of Syria in the social and intellectual scale. Take Miss Verner down to lunch—it is quite ready.”

Lord Cecil was an elderly young man, slight, tall, a little stooped, a good deal near-sighted, with a glass in his eye which was perpetually dropping and interrupting him in the midst of his most important sentences.

“Long since you left Syria?” asked Lord Cecil, as they descended the broad stair.

“About eleven or twelve years ago,” returned Stasie drily, a little provoked at being represented as other than English.

“Ah! oh, I see! brought up here.”

“I am not an Eastern, I am English *pur sang*.”

“Yes! Well, but Kharapet, nice old fellow! *he* was Eastern to the tips of his fingers!”

“He was a dear, kind, good man, but he was only my mother’s husband.”

“To be sure ! I might have guessed it ! Where shall we sit, Lady Elizabeth ? ”

“Oh ! here on my right.” And the occupation of eating caused a short cessation of Lady Elizabeth’s endless talk. But she soon took up her parable again, and plunged into the details of a gigantic bazaar which she was assisting the Duchess of Pembroke and the Ladies Lambton to get up.

Lord Cecil did not seem too much interested. He tried hard to talk with Stasie, who was amused at his vain efforts to keep his glass in his eye, and his persistent attempts to break away from Lady Elizabeth, although she felt vexed and anxious respecting her interview with her guardian. How could she speak of her own affairs before Lord Cecil, and especially before Kharapet, who would, she felt sure, oppose her ?

They had been but a short time at table when Mr. Wyatt entered, followed by Kharapet ; and, after a very polite greeting, and many apologies for being late, he took his place at the end of the table. Kharapet looked more than usually sleek,

handsome, and picturesque. He bent with Oriental grace and deference before the lady of the house, and then passing on to Stasie took her hand in both of his, and murmured a Syriac sentence he had once explained to her, and which was all glowing with adoration and flattering similes.

“You remember Lord Cecil Annesley?” said Lady Elizabeth.

Yes; Mr. Kharapet remembered him vividly, pleasantly, especially in connection with that night attack by Arabs on the raft, when moored at the river-side; how his lordship’s courage and decision——

“Gad, I was in a horrid fright!” interrupted Lord Cecil, “and blazed away in the dark, till the enemy got into a worse fright than myself.”

“’Tis ever the habit of your countrymen to disparage their own bravery, my lord,” returned Kharapet, dwelling on the last word as though he loved the appellation.

Conversation now grew loud and general, and Stasie feared for her opportunity; but fortunately Mr. Wyatt was more occupied with his luncheon than the topics under discussion, and Stasie was next him.

“I do so want to speak to you,” she said at last, coaxingly, with her sweetest smile.

“Certainly, my dear young lady! I am quite at your service, only I *must* leave in half an hour. Tell me what it is. Oh! don’t mind them; they won’t hear a word we are saying.”

“Well then, Mr. Wyatt,” began Stasie desperately, “I want your permission to go abroad,—to travel, to study, to have masters and all that. I am but half educated——”

“Very praiseworthy indeed! an excellent idea! We must find you a good chaperon—and—I will speak to Lady Elizabeth; she always has heaps of distressed gentlewomen on her list who would be charmed with such an appointment. What do Kharapet and Mr. Harding say? I am really so busy that——”

“Oh! *they* refer me to *you*. Pray do not send me back to them.”

“No!”—smiling pleasantly on her. “There can be no possible objection to your plan. Nor need you make any secret of it. My dear,”—raising his voice to catch his wife’s notice,—“here is Miss Verner wanting my permission to go abroad! I have not the slightest objection, if

we can secure a suitable companion for her. You will, no doubt, know of some such person?"

"I know of one myself," put in Stasie eagerly; but no one heeded her.

"No doubt I can," returned Lady Elizabeth amiably. "But it is just possible we may be going to Rome this winter; why should not Miss Verner come with us?"

"I should be charmed," said Mr. Wyatt, helping himself to some Stilton cheese. "Very pleasant society in Rome—art, antiquities, studios, and all that sort of thing. Miss Verner might cultivate herself to any extent, and come on to Florence in the spring."

"I am sure it would be a happy chance," began Lord Cecil. Here his glass dropped plump into his plate of strawberries and cream, and had to be picked out, wiped, and refixed. Meantime Lady Elizabeth had taken up the running, and Lord Cecil's happy chance was lost for ever. Kharapet kept silence, looking steadily at the tablecloth, till Lady Elizabeth came to the end of sundry proposals and suggestions.

"It would indeed be an enormous benefit to my dear young charge to be with your ladyship,"

he began, raising his eyes, from which he managed to banish any special expression—(“ Why will he call her ‘ her ladyship,’ as if he were a footman ? ” thought Stasie)—“ and until Mr. Wyatt and yourself decide on your plans it would be fruitless to arrange anything for Miss Verner. Such an opportunity must not be lost.”

“ But, Lady Elizabeth ! ” cried Stasie, in despair at seeing how the current was setting, “ though it would be very nice to go with you, I should like to go at once, and you will not go till winter, and you may not go at all. Besides,” colouring and hesitating a moment in a little awe at opposing the august assembly, “ I have an aunt—that is, my mother’s aunt—who has travelled a great deal, and she—that is, I said I would take her with me if I were let to go. She is very nice and kind, and the only relation I have, so I thought it would be natural and pleasant to have her with me.” Stasie had talked herself into calmness and courage. She would not allow herself to be overawed. It was a decisive moment.

“ An aunt ! I had no idea you had any relations,” said Lady Elizabeth. “ Had you ? ” to her husband. He shook his head, and sipped a glass of port.

“Well, I suppose it would be a natural arrangement. In short, you might go to Switzerland or the Tyrol with her during the summer and autumn, and then send her back and join us at Rome.”

Lady Elizabeth was always reluctant to give up any scheme of her own when opposed, although ready enough to change if yielded to. Stasie shook her head. “If she comes with me——” she began, when Kharapet interrupted her eagerly—

“I fear this good lady is by no means in independent circumstances. Miss Verner would have to pay her expenses as though she were a stranger, though perhaps, on account of the relationship, she might not expect a salary.”

Stasie darted a look of contempt at her friend and ally.

“Oh, that is of no consequence, provided she is a proper person with whom to trust my ward,” said Mr. Wyatt easily ; people are so often liberal with money that does not belong to them.

“But,” urged Kharapet, “think of the great advantage of being with Mr. and Lady Elizabeth Wyatt. I do not think, my dear Stasie, you are sufficiently aware of the value of such protection, or grateful enough.”

“Indeed I am grateful,” said Stasie with sweet frankness, “and I should greatly like to be with Lady Elizabeth in Rome; but as she is so kind herself, she will understand that I cling to my mother’s only relative,—at least the only one I know anything of,—especially as I may be of some use and comfort to her.”

“Very nice of you, my dear—very proper,” remarked Lady Elizabeth, carefully selecting an apricot, and Lord Cecil having restored his glass, said, with a laugh, “I assure you, Miss Verner, you have only to announce ‘a few relations wanted,’ and an enormous crop will spring up. I daresay I could prove that I am a first cousin only once removed if you will permit me to try.”

“Thank you, I will not put you to the proof,” returned Stasie, smiling a nervous little smile; she felt in truth more disposed to cry; her heart beat, her lip quivered, as she perceived how helpless she was among the contending wills of those who had the disposal of her fate. She was indignant too. Hormuz had no right to talk of Aunt Clem’s poverty before that grinning stranger lord. The chatter to which she had listened had not im-

pressed Stasie with any respect for the opinions of those who coolly discussed what to do with her ; she was rapidly growing too indignant for fear or even prudence—her guardian did not care a straw about her !

“ Yes,” Lady Elizabeth was saying, when Stasie again attended to what was going on ; “ sentiment and good feeling are all very well, but you must be guided by what those older and wiser than yourself think best for you.”

“ Just so,” observed Mr. Wyatt, rising. “ You will excuse me, Miss Verner ; excuse me, Lord Cecil ; my time is up. I have much pleasure, my dear ward, in giving my consent to your making some stay on the continent ; you can arrange the details with Lady Elizabeth, who has a capital head for business, and is truly interested in your welfare. Good-morning, Kharapet ; *au revoir*, Lord Cecil ; we meet at the Speaker’s dinner to-night.”

“ Good-bye !” said Stasie, standing up with flushed cheeks, and giving him her hand, “ I am very much obliged to you, but unless I can go with my aunt I don’t care to go at all. I shall stay with Mrs. Harding.”

“Very well, very well!” said Mr. Wyatt hastily, and left the room.

Kharapet looked absolutely aghast, and Lord Cecil fixed his glass a little more firmly, to observe the different faces.

This little ebullition rather amused Lady Elizabeth, and suggested the idea that Stasie might not be a desirable companion, perhaps rather difficult to manage; indeed the proposition to take her with them to Rome had been a mere passing thought, still she did not care to give it up without a fair amount of resistance, but she was in a hurry to go out, and had spent time enough on her husband’s ward.

“Come, come, Miss Verner,” she said good-humouredly, “you must not take things *au pied de la lettre*. Our movements are quite uncertain. Suppose you make your arrangements with your aunt, and leave our meeting in Rome to the chapter of accidents.”

“I should be charmed to *meet* you there,” cried Stasie warmly, but with an emphasis that showed she stuck to her colours. “I have already promised my aunt she should accompany me, and I do not like to disappoint her.”

“The promises of a minor don’t count,” returned Lady Elizabeth.

“Still the minor may feel bound by them,” said Lord Cecil; “I am sure Miss Verner is the soul of loyalty.”

“How can you possibly tell?” exclaimed Stasie, laughing.

Kharapet opened his lips as if to speak, and then closed them.

Stasie’s words revealed a new influence—a fresh complication with which he had not reckoned. He recalled the lady-like, limp old maid he had met at luncheon, and thought hard, how best to manipulate obstacles to the furtherance of his own schemes.

That Stasie should not leave England save with himself he was firmly resolved, so he kept silence and listened.

“Now,” resumed Lady Elizabeth, “if you have all finished luncheon, I must go out. Miss Verner, would you like to go with me? I am going to young Leonardo Melvin’s studio; you know he has been so shamefully treated by the Royal Academy people; every one of his pictures refused—every one, so Lady Kilconquhar and the Duchess have

begged of me to take all the people I can find to look at them in his own studio. Now, if Miss Verner chose to buy a few of his water-colour sketches, just for her own morning-room (when she has one), it would really be money well spent, would it not Mr. Kharapet? You have the management of Miss Verner's money, have you not?"

Kharapet turned pale at this appalling proposition. "I share that responsibility with Mr. Harding," he stammered.

"I must wish you good-morning," said Lord Cecil. "Miss Verner, I hope I may have the pleasure of meeting you again, and proving that we are cousins! Shall you be at Mrs. Bernard's to-night?"

Stasie disclaimed any acquaintance with Mrs. Bernard, and Lord Cecil made his *adieux* and departed.

"I shall not keep you a moment," said Lady Elizabeth, ringing for the carriages; "can we put you down anywhere, Mr. Kharapet? I presume you will come with me, Miss Verner?"

"Yes, with pleasure;" but Lady Elizabeth was gone. Directly they were left alone Stasie opened on Kharapet.

"Why did you talk about Aunt Clem being so poor—before total strangers? It was not nice of you, Hormuz."

"You English are superior to that consideration for wealth which affects other races," said Kharapet; "and I was too anxious about you to choose my words."

"That is all nonsense! You know we are most shabbily ashamed of poverty in England, and I don't want to go abroad with the Wyatts. You have been very unkind and disagreeable, Hormuz."

"How can I atone? I was not aware I vexed you."

"I was in hopes I could tell Aunt Clem that all was settled. It is nearly, if you will only back me up with Mr. Harding. I would like to go and talk to Aunt Clem; but I must not refuse Lady Elizabeth."

"Certainly not! and Stasie—fair sweet Stasie! you do not want to buy pictures, do you, Stasie?"

"Pictures! no, where could I put them?"

"That is well—that is very well! Now, will it please you if I go and see your good aunt? and tell her of this day's conversation, and how you have won your guardian's consent."

“ Oh, thank you, Hormuz ! that will be so kind. You think I have Mr. Wyatt’s consent, then ? they all seem so careless of what I wish.”

“ I think you may be satisfied. Give me Miss Stretton’s address, and I will go there.”

“ Give me your pencil, and I will write it on one of your cards. Thank you ever so much, dear Hormuz !”

“ O beautiful hand ! O lovely lips that speak so kindly !” cried Kharapet with unguarded fervour that startled Stasie with sudden frightened prescience.





CHAPTER XI.

WHEN Kharapet had seen Lady Elizabeth and Stasie drive off, he made his way slowly into Park Lane—slowly and in deep thought. On the whole, he was hopeful and content. He was near the moment for which he so intensely longed, and which he had postponed partly in deference to Mr. Harding's advice, partly from an unwonted distrust in his own fascinations.

The effect produced upon him by his brother's step-daughter was something totally different from anything he had ever before experienced.

The love of an Eastern is utterly dissimilar from what we know or imagine of the feeling ; we can scarce conceive the materialism of a passion stripped of the delicate drapery in which fancy and tenderness and chivalrous respect enshroud it. To a man like Kharapet—in his natural normal condition—love was the brief fierce fire of an

hour, a vivid blaze and then extinction, a momentary necessity, apart from his real life, pursuits, ambitions.

To accumulate wealth was the chief aim of his existence; to stand well with the powerful the second, and the most powerful, the most dominant, men, he had ever encountered were the English grandees whom accident had thrown in his way.

He was a clever, capable fellow, beyond the average in intellect, and, given a chance, clung to it with tenacious grasp. He had had a hard struggle for existence in his boyhood. His elder brother had given him little or no help, yet he had hoped against hope that he might bequeath him some of his wealth. Becoming interpreter and secretary to Percy Wyatt, Esq., M.P., he had guided that gentleman's steps to the Mardīn Consulate, and managed to establish friendly relations with H.B.M.'s Consul there by appearing independent and thriving.

He there saw Stasie as a little four-year-old pet and plaything, and on a subsequent visit was not inconsolable to observe her failing health. From this time he never lost sight of his half-

brother, and, having been called to Baghdad by business, proceeded farther to pay him a visit. He thus happened to be at Mardīn when the elder Kharapet died. But his opportune presence brought him no good fortune. He found that the late Consul had been for some time transmitting all available funds for investment in England. Nor was he aware that he was named one of the executors to his brother's will till informed by Mr. Harding. The object was obvious. Various sums were still due to the estate by doubtful debtors in Bombay, and an executor on the spot was useful.

The disappointment was keen ; but Hormuz, after an evil quarter of an hour looked round for the next best means of securing some of the supposed wealth bequeathed by his brother. The way seemed simple enough. He would go to London and marry the heiress. He did not hasten his movements, however. She was safe at school, and when a little older, riper, and readier to stand up for her own rights and wishes, he would "come and see and conquer," get the money, and lay the foundations of a colossal fortune.

He did not calculate, however, on the effect his step-niece (if such a relation exists) would produce upon him. Her fairness, her tall graceful figure, her pale golden brown hair, her dark speaking eyes, seemed to him the perfection of loveliness ; at the first interview he was lost. If rich, he would even have paid out much money to be the owner of such an angel !

But, when added to her other charms, she was possessed of something nearer twenty-five than twenty thousand pounds, he was indeed ready to fall down and worship.

Yet his position with her, though commanding, did not always seem to him secure. There were looks and tones, and little speeches, and even gestures that suggested to him at times vague fears, undefined apprehensions. Though a mere woman—an unformed young girl—to whom man's love was a necessity so great, that nature would compel her to grasp the first offered, there was a nameless something, a freedom, a careless unconscious strength, a self-sufficiency impossible to define that warned Kharapet to be circumspect, that conveyed by some subtile electric intelligence the impression

of a spirit he could neither comprehend nor conquer, and which he might rouse to arms against him by his too hasty action! There were times when this sense of impotence on his own part weighed so forcibly upon him, that in the midst of his most passionate longings, strange flashes of fierce hate would dart through him and stir his soul with murderous impulse.

But this bright afternoon no such unpleasant sensations disturbed Hormuz Kharapet. Stasie had been kind, and circumstances seemed setting in a favourable current.

How fair and friendly life looked to him! When rich and wedded to Stasie he would do something grand, something benevolent, that would show gratitude to God, Fate, fortune—whatever it is that orders our destinies, *and* thus improve his position with his eccentric but powerful patrons among the nobles of England.

Whatever of good was in his nature clung round the idea of Stasie. Had she returned his love, she might perhaps have raised him, *or* satiety might have broken the spell, and he might bring her low, even to the ground, with the degradation of his rule!

A little flower-girl trotting by his side offered him a bouquet of violets for a penny, a pinched pale-faced hungry-looking urchin. His heart was soft and glowing with anticipation of the great joy almost in his grasp,—he paused, and nearly put his hand in his pocket, but a second glance showed him that it was not a good pennyworth, so he checked the rash impulse and hailed a Westbourne Grove omnibus.

From the time her niece bade her good-bye Miss Stretton had not ceased to dwell with mingled anxiety and delight on the prospect opened up by Stasie's ready acceptance of her suggestion respecting foreign travel.

Nothing could possibly have offered, more desirable or full of promise. The relationship between herself and her intended *protégée* would give her quite a different position from that of merely a paid chaperon. "I will not stick out for high pay either," she thought. "I see they are inclined to keep her tight. Stasie is a dear, generous, high-minded girl, just like what *I* used to be when I was her age, and she will not let me want for anything. I should not wonder that

she made me a nice little allowance when she comes into her property *if* she does not marry! Poor dear! it would be much more for her own happiness *not* to marry young!" and in a half-unconscious way Aunt Clem resolved to do her best for that happiness by keeping presumptuous suitors at a distance.

Time had not robbed Aunt Clem of her imaginative powers, and the present being generally dark, drear, or difficult, she never failed to deck the future in the brightest and most charming colours. Each fresh "dear young creature" she undertook, was an angel, who would no doubt prove a friend for life; and as each cruelly and heartlessly disappointed her, she set to work to build new castles in the air. But a well-dowered niece was something not to be had every day; and with what Aunt Clem (who was a very religious woman) called pious gratitude, she determined to be all that was affectionate and complaisant to Stasie and those connected with her.

The severe cold from which she had suffered had weakened her considerably, and she felt low and tremulously eager for news of Stasie's pro-

gress in obtaining her guardian's sanction for their scheme. "I must try and get up my strength," she thought, "for we may have to start soon. It is very fine to-day; I will go out for a little walk, the air will do me good. What a fright I look! rest and good food would soon set me up. I almost wish that dear child would be content to have a pretty house in London or its neighbourhood. I don't feel quite equal to trapesing about the continent, and eating those *table d' hôte* messes. What is it? come in," this in answer to a knock at the door; enter the household slavey with a card cautiously held in an interior fold of her apron.

"The gentleman is below, shall I tell him to come up, miss?"

"Up here? into my bed-room! You are indeed ignorant, Jemima! I will come down; can I not see him in the back parlour?"

"Yes, 'm," and the girl retired sulkily.

"It is the executor," said Miss Stretton to herself. "It's a mercy I was dressed and had my bonnet on; I wonder what he has come about? to say Stasie cannot be placed with

me!" With an aching anxious heart the poor lady descended the stairs.

Kharapet was in the sole possession of the shabby little parlour—the infirmary for unsound, halt, and maimed furniture, when Miss Stretton entered. He was standing in the window, the soft and rather picturesque felt hat which he affected as a compromise with British head gear in his hand, his attitude a very fair reproduction of Mr. Wyatt's favourite pose when listening to a crotchety constituent.

He greeted Aunt Clem with one of his best bows, to which she responded by an elegant curtsy.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Kharapet?" she said sweetly. Mr. Kharapet bowed again, and took a chair. "To what may I owe the honour of this visit?" asked Miss Stretton, as Kharapet, according to his custom, left the initiative to her.

"I have come as ambassador from your niece, Miss Verner," he replied in the most carefully softened voice. "She begged me to explain to you that she is obliged to go out driving with our kind friend Lady Elizabeth Wyatt, and cannot therefore call upon you as she wished. I am also anxious to improve my acquaintance with so

near and valued a relative of my poor brother's adopted daughter."

"You are very good," murmured Aunt Clem, still uneasy.

"More," resumed Kharapet, "I am commissioned to tell you that Mr. Wyatt—Stasie's guardian—sees no objection to her going abroad. My Lady Elizabeth suggested that her husband's ward might travel under her protection, but your niece bravely and resolutely declared that she had promised to go with you, and would go with no one else."

"Sweet child!" ejaculated Miss Stretton, her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I need not say that I am anxious to carry out her wishes," continued the Syrian, "but I am not alone in my office of executor. I have to manage as best I can with my colleague, Mr. Harding, an excellent man of business, but less sympathetic than myself with the natural desires of a young and charming creature."

He paused and looked at Miss Stretton, not knowing exactly how to shape his course. Time was pressing, and he was engaged for five-o'clock tea at the Dowager Lady Kilconquhar's.

He had spent the moments while waiting for Miss Stretton in looking at the books on a small centre table, and had picked out a volume of severely evangelical sermons, on the fly-leaf of which was inscribed, "Miss C. Stretton, with Christian greetings from the writer."

"Do you think, sir, that Mr. Harding would object to my niece residing with me?" asked poor Aunt Clem tremulously, as he was thus reflecting.

"He can have no reasonable objection, my dear lady. Still, I cannot answer for him. He is my very good friend, and Mrs. Harding is also good, very good; but I venture to speak frankly to you—there is no trace of devotion in the household—the world and the things of the world alone occupy them. I may seem too severe in my ideas—they may not suit yours; but I cling to my faith, all the closer because I have felt the whip of persecution."

"Indeed, I am rejoiced to hear you express such opinions. They have long been mine. They have been my support under many trials. Yes, I quite agree with you; that dear child should not be wholly left to such guidance—perhaps an absence from England—but," inter-

rupting herself, "Mr. Harding's opposition may prove an insurmountable obstacle. What do you think?" anxiously.

"I hope not. In fact, I am not without influence, and I am prepared to use that influence on your behalf. The strong attachment which Miss Verner has conceived for you, the evident similarity of our opinions on most important points, disposes me to think you would be a kind and judicious companion, especially if you would condescend to be in some measure guided by my counsels."

"I shall be most happy, my dear sir, to have the benefit of your advice."

"Then, Miss Stretton, may I trust you not to divulge to *any* one, especially not to Stasie, what I am about to confide in you?"

"Ah, you may trust *me*, Mr. Kharapet. I have been the depository of many secrets."

"Then," said he, drawing his chair nearer to her and lowering his voice, "I *will* trust you. Miss Stretton, my highest hope is to call our dear Stasie my wife! I am already connected with her. I am of the same faith—of an older branch of the Universal Church. I am the favoured

guest of some of your greatest nobles. I state these facts to show that I am not unworthy of your niece; but I am not quite sure that Mr. Harding really favours my pretensions. He does not openly oppose me, yet there is something not quite friendly in his aspect. Dear Miss Stretton, give me your effectual aid and you will find"—slowly and emphatically—"that I am not ungrateful."

"What does he mean?" thought Miss Stretton, while she said, "Is Stasie, then, not aware? Do you think her well disposed towards you?"

"How can I tell!" exclaimed Kharapet, clasping his fine brown hands together, and resting them on the table near him. "She is so young—so inexperienced, so unsuspecting. She thinks she wants to study, to travel—a thousand things; but when I speak to her, when I tell her how my life, my hopes, my all hang upon her, the hidden springs of passion, of affection will rise, and respond, and bless me. I am sure—at least, I think I am sure—of her guardian's consent; but should I be accepted by your niece, the marriage may not take place for some time. I cannot tell, difficulties may arise; and it is dur-

ing this period of an engagement that I should like her to be with you, where I might have unrestrained access to her."

"I feel a little bewildered, Mr. Kharapet," returned Aunt Clem, still uneasy, yet hopeful. "I certainly do not know you much; but from what you say, and indeed my own observation, I am sure you would make my dear Stasie happy. Of course I have only found her to lose her, but I must not think of self."

"No, madam. You must leave it to me—to us, I hope I may say—to think of and for you. If in this matter you befriend me, I will assist Stasie to do that which I know she would wish—that is, to ensure your future against the necessity"—he paused and looked round—"of living in an apartment so ill suited to a lady of your condition as *this*."

"You are too kind! too considerate!" cried poor Aunt Clem, deeply affected. "Mine has been a life of trial and—and privation; and I honestly confess that the prospect of a little peace and comfort is as unexpected as it is delightful. I know I have no claim on my dear niece, but I am ready to do all I can for her,

and for you. Your great kindness proves that you are worthy to be her husband. I don't care to go dragging about the Continent, though I will go if necessary. I don't want much, Mr. Kharapet ; a little ease of mind, now that I am not so strong as I used to be, would indeed be a boon."

"Trust to me!" returned Kharapet, rising, his black eyes shining on her as he smiled a soft caressing smile. "I will see that the future shall have no terrors for you. Probably Stasie will call on you to-morrow. Pray use your influence against the Mathews family. I distrust them. They have tried to get money out of Stasie."

"How unprincipled!" cried Aunt Clem indignantly.

"Let us *say* nothing against them," returned Kharapet, "for Stasie is very tenacious of her likings. They have left London. Might I suggest that when Stasie comes you do not oppose her schemes ; let her talk of plans and arrangements—a few days may bring a change. Above all, do not permit her to think we have entered into this little compact. It would injure you in

her opinion—very unjustly—yet it would so. I am disposed to have unbounded confidence in you. I am by nature deeply grateful to those who assist me ; but, as is usual with such natures, perhaps a little unforgiving to those who cross me. We, however, are sure to act in unison, for we have the same motive—the welfare, the happiness of our dear Stasie. Your excellent tact may suggest little words of sympathetic goodwill which will help me in her estimation, for she thinks much of you.”

“I feel I can most conscientiously forward your wishes,” replied Aunt Clem with some solemnity.

They shook hands cordially, and with some more complimentary speeches bade each other adieu.

“Well !” thought Aunt Clem, as she slowly climbed to her bedroom, “I *am* thankful I was not out when he came. It has not been a bad day’s work for me ! I would rather have had the dear child all to myself, but that would not last long ; some greedy fellow would be sure to pick her up. Now, Mr. Kharapet is a truly religious, sensible, superior man, in the very best society,—and so handsome ! Then we know who he is, and that is a great comfort. He is a sort of man

one can trust, and I feel that Providence has directed the whole thing. I can really hardly believe that I can face the future with hope!—A cup of tea will be a great refreshment. I'll ring, and give that disagreeable girl a shilling; then she'll be more civil and boil my kettle for me."

Nor was Kharapet less content. He had a vague suspicion that there were difficulties to be overcome before he could call Stasie his own absolutely, and he felt that in Miss Stretton he had secured a useful, pliable tool. He had not committed himself to anything definite; yet had raised hopes which he could fulfil cheaply, in the letter; as to the spirit, each was free to form his or her theory; for the rest, the excellent lady was rather agreeable to him, her tone of admiring amiability was very soothing and acceptable to a man who was perpetually in the presence of those to whom he felt obliged to pay the same tribute himself.

"She has evidently gained a strong hold on Stasie," he thought; "and even after she has accepted me it will be well to have her aunt's friendship and help."

.

While these schemes revolved round the unconscious Stasie, she went her way bright and unruffled. A little note from Aunt Clem thanked her in elegant phraseology for sending so charming and agreeable an envoy to tell of her success so far. She described her delight in looking forward to companionship with her dear Stasie, and promised to come and see her soon. This missive put Stasie in the highest good-humour with Kharapet, although she did not quite forget the startling effect of his parting words at Lady Elizabeth Wyatt's.

She was so accustomed to his flattering speeches, so used to account for them in her own mind as Eastern hyperbole, so amused at his *empressement*, that she was blind to the reality beneath it all.

Moreover, she was deeply impressed by Dr. Brooke. He filled her mind, to the exclusion of Kharapet and his sugary compliments.

She was unconscious of the hold Brooke had upon her imagination, because there was something fresh, something legitimately interesting, in their conversations, which were always free from the least approach to what could be called

flirting. She, therefore, never hesitated to let her thoughts dwell upon him. She compared him with all her favourite heroes in history and fiction, and found that, although inferior in some respects, he was undoubtedly equal in others, and so struck a satisfactory balance.

The few days that intervened between her luncheon at Lady Elizabeth's and the dance at Lady Pearson's were actively and agreeably employed in preparing for her first ball.

The delights of such an occupation have been often enlarged upon, and to none could it bring greater pleasure than to Stasie. She knew, in a large-minded way, that she was handsome ; but she did not dwell upon the idea, only she found herself unusually anxious about the fit and becomingness of her costume. However, Mrs. Harding employed a good *modiste*, and the result was successful.

A diaphonous cloud of white gauze, its draperies caught up with ferns and wild roses ; her abundant hair, arranged with cunning simplicity, produced an effect which elicited some very forcible expressions of admiration from her host when she presented herself in the drawing-room,

where Mrs. Harding was waiting for her. Her figure and style were well adapted for evening dress. The creamy fineness of her skin, the unconscious dignity which came from her height—her natural carriage, and the setting on of her head—gave her an air of distinction more suited to the descendant of a noble line than to the scion of a semi-genteel family.

“You look very nice indeed,” said Mrs. Harding kindly.

“I am sure, so do you,” cried Stasie in frank admiration. “I never saw you in full dress before.” Mrs. Harding’s costume was of white silk and black lace, with damask roses in her hair. She looked as she generally did, graceful, refined, complete.

“She ain’t bad; but she’ll never be such a stunner as you are, Stasie!” said Mr. Harding, turning his back on his wife. “Then you see you are fresher by ten years at least.”

Stasie looked uneasily at Mrs. Harding to see how she took this speech, the brutality of which seemed so unpardonable that for the moment it chilled the young *débutante’s* joyous mood. But Mrs. Harding looked serene and unmoved.

"I think Kharapet will be at the end of his tether in the way of compliments when he sees you to night," continued Mr. Harding, as the carriage door closed on them, and they rolled away toward the festive scene.

"He will be spared that strain on his resources. He is not invited," said Mrs. Harding.

"How is that? Why did you not get him a card?"

"He does not approve of dancing, and he does not know how to dance."

"Excellent reasons," said Stasie, laughing; she was somehow relieved to find that for this evening she should be free from the observation of her Eastern friend. It seemed as if Mrs. Harding's words had filled up her measure of delight.

Lady Pearson's was a large house in the then new district behind Westbourne Terrace. The ball-room and approaches were brilliantly lighted and decorated with flowers in the usual fashion. There was nothing more or less in the arrangements than in those of fifty other parties going on in London that evening, but to Stasie's inexperience it seemed fairyland, a scene of enchantment. She felt tremulous with excitement

as she ascended the stair leaning on Mr. Harding's arm, and following closely on her chaperon's footsteps. In truth, though she did not acknowledge it even in "communing with her own heart," she was nervously anxious to meet Dr. Brooke. It was a week since she had seen him—not since that disagreeable expedition of hers with Bob Mathews to the Strand, when she had encountered him so unexpectedly.

She had looked for him oftener than she would have confessed, although she had once exclaimed to Mrs. Harding, "I wonder what has become of Dr. Brooke?" and had been satisfied with her reply, "There are some Indian friends of his in town,—the people he was staying with in Wales,—and he is a good deal with them."

But now, in her new dress, and conscious of looking well, she longed to hear his half-grave half-playful comments on her first appearance in public. His remarks generally had a tinge of elder-brotherly superiority, with a strain of suppressed warmth breathing through. She would be able to talk to him too without being bored by Kharapet, or feeling it necessary to atone for her occasional, nay frequent, preference of Brooke's

conversation. A quick glance, first round the tea-room, and then at the groups, looking on at the first quadrille just begun as they entered, showed her he had not yet appeared. Stasie's thoughts, however, were agreeably diverted by Lady Pearson, who after greeting them at the entrance of the ballroom, called up a slight gentleman-like well-set-up young man, with a correct button-hole bouquet, and accurately parted hair, "Let me introduce my son, Miss Verner," she said, whereupon he immediately took the card she had just received, and, saying, "May I ask for two dances ? the next waltz, and the lancers later on," began to inscribe his name.

"Oh yes, the waltz certainly ; but I do not think I could ever manage the lancers !"

"Permit me to be your pilot !" said the young man, returning the card with a bow. "Meantime, you are in a draught here ; will you come to the other side of the room ? the quadrille is nearly over ;" and he offered his arm.

Stasie, not quite sure of her ground, glanced at Mrs. Harding, who, with a smile and nod, said, "You will find me on the sofa there, near the fireplace."

Stasie, therefore, accepted the offered arm, and walked away pleased with her cavalier, who was well supplied with small talk. "You were not at Mrs. Broadhurst's party last night, Miss Verner? It was rather slow—a lot of singing and fiddling first, and then a dance when one had grown limp with heat."

"This is the first real party I ever was at," said Stasie, "except one, and that was only a reception."

"I know! awful concerns those receptions! I am proud to think I shall be your first partner at your first dance." Stasie laughed, and soon found herself asking and answering questions respecting herself and her partner. He was in a cavalry regiment he told her, and had a few days' leave to run up for his mother's dance. "Very lucky for him," he added with a complimentary smile and glance. He was quartered in a horrible place, Manchester, and hoped the regiment would soon be sent to India, and so on. While they talked easily together, another gentleman was brought up by Lady Pearson, and a third was presented by Stasie's own partner.

Her card was being rapidly filled, till she

almost feared she would not have a dance left for Dr. Brooke. "I suppose he dances," she thought, never doubting that he would ask her.

But the first chords of the waltz were sounding, and she glided into the delightful dance. Young Pearson was an excellent partner, and though doubtful of her own powers, Stasie soon felt safe in the hands, or rather the arms, of her guide.





CHAPTER XII.

IN the height of her enjoyment, flattered at being so eagerly sought (not dreaming that a rumour had run through the room proclaiming her heir to the untold wealth of an Eastern potentate), hoping that Dr. Brooke might witness her success, Stasie had paused for a few moments' rest, and smiling not without some coquetry on her cavalier, who was ready to proclaim her the jolliest girl he had ever met—"so bright and up to fun, none of your fast ones either!" when she saw Dr. Brooke come in by a door exactly opposite where she stood. She was quite sure, in some occult way, that he saw her, yet he made no sign, and after looking round the room, he walked over to where Mrs. Harding sat engaged in intermittent talk with a stout and gorgeous dowager.

Stasie's partner soon started her off again.

“Don’t let us lose the finish,” he said. “They will soon stop ;” but through the throng, and in spite of her rapid gyrations, she could see Brooke leaning on the corner of the chimney-piece, and talking to his cousin, evidently with interest and animation. Then just as the music ceased, Mrs. Harding rose, took his arm, and went away. “My chaperon has deserted me,” said Stasie, looking after her.

“Who ? Mrs. Harding ? What a nice little woman she is ! My governor is a great admirer of hers. She has just gone out with Brooke ; do you know Brooke ? I believe he is a very clever fellow ; a brother officer of mine used to be in his regiment, and——”

Stasie was listening eagerly for the conclusion of his sentence, when No. 2 on her card presented himself, and she was carried off for the next polka, during which neither Mrs. Harding nor Dr. Brooke reappeared. At its conclusion, however, Stasie perceived her missing chaperon talking in an adjoining room with a stately gray-haired old gentleman who wore one or two decorations, and whom she guessed to be Sir Frederic Pearson. Thither, therefore, she

directed her steps, rejecting her partner's suggestions that it was probably cooler and quieter in the conservatory, and dismissing him with a slight bow, when she found herself beside Mrs. Harding. No. 2 therefore departed with the impression that the young heiress was already beginning to give herself airs.

Mrs. Harding introduced her to Sir Frederic, who, after a few pleasant courteous words, left them to attend to his duties elsewhere.

"Has Dr. Brooke gone away?" asked Stasie as soon as she was alone with her friend.

"You saw him, then? Oh no! He is only gone to look for Mrs. Marsden's shawl. The Marsdens are his friends from Wales. There are two girls, one of them is rather nice. The mother is very amusing. Jim took me away to introduce me to her. I hope you are enjoying the dance, Stasie. Let me look at your card; why, it is nearly full."

"Oh, it is delightful!" said Stasie, looking down at the carpet; but as she said it she felt as if something like a cold mist had come over her, and the lights had suddenly grown dim. But this was absurd; she roused herself; of

course Dr. Brooke must pay attention to his friends, and by and by he would come and talk to her. It was not his momentary absence that dulled her, but his curious cold look of recognition without acknowledgment, and that too after the longest break in their intercourse, which had occurred since the beginning of their acquaintance. She was half ashamed of herself for such morbid nonsense, only she thought she was rather a favourite with the grave doctor, and that he would have come at once to speak a congratulatory word or two at this her first party. Still she was resolved not to allow herself to be ridiculous about such a trifle, and so went away cheerfully and graciously with No. 3, a gaunt pale young man, much given to music and high art, which had not yet become æstheticism.

This time the dance was a quadrille, and just as it was formed, Stasie saw Mrs. Harding come up on Dr. Brooke's arm, followed by a rather pretty red-haired girl, conducted by the son of the house, and take their places *vis-à-vis*.

Stasie felt considerably cheered ; he had not gone away at any rate, and after this dance he would no doubt come and speak to her. But

no ! When the last notes of the last bar died away, and the dancers turned to look for seats—or ices—Dr. Brooke led his partner towards the refreshment room, giving Stasie a perfectly polite, but rather indifferent, bow, as he passed.

There was no use in thinking about it. In rather less than a week her friend and ally, her pleasant adversary, the only man of thought and culture she had ever known, had nearly forgotten her !

This disappointment cut deeper than might have been expected. It seemed to quench all the innocent pleasure she took in her own appearance, to lower her in her own esteem, to reveal to her the loneliness and isolation of her position. Yes ! she was absolutely alone ; she had not a natural tie in the world except poor Aunt Clem, and no one cared for her save Kharapet, and from him she shrank with an instinct newly developed. There in her pretty dress, in the midst of her little triumph, envied by many a partnerless girl, she could have sat down and cried, even while she felt angry with herself for her folly and weakness ! She felt quite glad when Mr. Pearson, slightly out of

breath, but bright and exultant that his turn was come, approached, and she rose with a smile so kind and sweet to take his arm as he said—"This is our dance, Miss Verner—the lancers"—that he was more convinced than ever that "it will be a lucky fellow, by Jove! that can get such a girl, with all her money."

When they reached the ballroom, however, and Stasie saw the confusion of even taking places for the dance, her courage failed. "I know I shall never get through it," she said, "you had much better find another partner. I shall be quite pleased to look on."

"But I shall not be pleased to dance with any one else," exclaimed young Pearson. "Shall we sit it out?"

"Oh yes, certainly! I should like it ever so much better."

"So should I. Let us go into the conservatory, it is far cooler than this room."

In a comfortable, dimly-lighted nook Mr. Pearson established himself and his companion, to whom he flattered himself he did the agreeable very successfully. She was more silent certainly than at first, but that allowed of his making more

play. So he favoured her with his ideas on many subjects, and she occasionally asked questions which started him off again when he came to a pause. At last she exclaimed, "The music has stopped, had we not better go upstairs?"

"It's a horrid bore. Look here, Miss Verner; will you give me the next dance but one? I see it's not filled on your card. It's a waltz. And then we go down to supper. I'm engaged to that little red-haired girl, Brooke's friend; but I will introduce another fellow to her."

"Very well," said Stasie indifferently.

"Thank you," putting his initials against the waltz, "that's all right. I protest it's a shame to leave this quiet nook. Isn't it?"

"Perhaps so. But one does not go to a dance to sit in the corner of a conservatory all the evening!"

"Quite true; but *I* would go to a dance any night on those conditions, *if* you would sit it out with me!"

The compliment was so broad as to be nearly rude, but the manner of saying it was frank, almost boyish; and Stasie took no notice, partly because, as the words were spoken, she and her

partner passed out of the conservatory on to the first landing, and met Dr. Brooke face to face going in with the before-mentioned little red-haired girl on his arm. He must have heard young Pearson's last words, as that gentleman's voice was neither soft nor low.

Brooke gave Stasie a smile in passing, and she returned it, thinking how terribly foolish she was, for of course Dr. Brooke must be occupied with his old friends.

It was not till after supper she found herself again beside Mrs. Harding, who was sitting in the smaller drawing-room beside an elderly lady in a warlike-looking head-dress decorated with red feathers.

"It is getting late, Stasie," she said, "and Mr. Harding is impatient to go home, but I do not like to take you away. Are you engaged for many more dances?"

"Only two or three more. Oh, do not go away just yet! Where is Mr. Harding? I will ask him to stay."

"At present he is in no hurry; he is in the supper-room."

Stasie looked at her card. The next dance—

a quadrille—was free, and then came three names in succession ; then she must go. How soon it would all be over, and to-morrow would be here, cold, prosaic to-morrow ! Could she ever be quite the same after the experience of to-night ?—the revelation of her own importance in one direction, her insignificance in another ? For a moment she was lost in thought, the next she was recalled to the living, vivid present.

“ I suppose you haven’t a dance to spare for me, Miss Verner ? ” said Dr. Brooke, coming up from behind her.

“ Yes, I have just one,” holding out her card, and speaking with her natural frank ease, “ and you do not deserve that one for being so tardy in asking for it ! ”

“ Am I tardy ? ” he returned, taking the card to write his name ; “ modest, you should say. What am I, a mere tyro in ballrooms, that I should presume to thrust myself among the splendid youths who dispute your favour ? That is the correct three-volume style, isn’t it ? ”

“ I think you are very ill-natured not to have asked me before this if I am enjoying my first party ! ”

"A most unnecessary question," said Dr. Brooke laughing, "when I see what I see! You look like the spirit of the ball—an unrelenting spirit I suspect—ready to devour victims of high and low degree."

"Do you mean that it is all fish that comes to my net," asked Stasie with spirit, for something in his tone, though light and pleasant, struck her as different from that in which he used to address her; "if so, why, thank you!"

"Well parried," said he, with mock gravity. "Miss Verner, you improve rapidly."

"Improve!" said Stasie, looking straight into his eyes with a serious puzzled expression; "you mean something quite different!"

Here the music struck up; Brooke offered her his arm to join the couples already assembling, and as they passed a long mirror he paused, and pointing to her reflection in it, said, laughing, "A creature like that need not fear much fault-finding!" There was real admiration in his eyes as he spoke, yet Stasie felt wounded, disappointed, indignant, and for once too perplexed for a ready reply. Brooke, thinking she had taken in the flattery, which had a certain amount of surface-

truth, made profound reflections on the intense conceit of women in general ; of the terrible counterpoise which it formed, even to intellectual abilities beyond the average. Better a plain, commonplace girl, not likely to be tempted into forgetting the delicate timidity so essential to female character, than a brilliant creature whose vanity betrays her into clandestine meetings with such a fearful cad as that Mathews ! “And with all my common sense I had begun to idealise her ! At any rate she is far too attractive to quarrel with.” Dismissing his philosophic thoughts, Brooke made himself very pleasant. He could talk well when he liked, though slightly sarcastic, and Stasie found him more amusing than usual, but certainly not so nice. All through the dance, Stasie did not know why, but his talk oppressed her. There was a change in him which she felt keenly, but could not define.

When the quadrille was over he led her back to the place where they had left Mrs. Harding, but she had disappeared.

“She will return no doubt to look for you,” said Dr. Brooke ; and he sat down beside his partner. There was a moment’s silence, when

something prompted Stasie to speak of her note to him ; perhaps an unconscious desire to pierce through the screen of careless civility and light bright talk, behind which his real self had retreated.

“I suppose you had my note, Dr. Brooke. I was so afraid you might have mentioned having met me with Bob Mathews.”

“Yes, I had it,” he replied, looking with no small surprise at her open, unembarrassed countenance. “Did you expect a reply?”

“Oh no ! it would have been awkward if a note to me had been seen in your writing. I daresay you thought it rather strange of me to write to you, but you see it was the only means I had of warning you not to tell !” Brooke still looked and listened in surprise. She spoke quite easily without downcast eyes or blushes. “It won’t long be a secret, and then you may say what you like ; but for the present I do not want any one to know. I have not even told Mrs. Harding.”

“In that I am sure you are wise,” said Brooke drily.

“Yes,” said Stasie, misunderstanding him.

“It does not do to get her into a scrape with Mr. Harding; he will be awfully angry when it all comes out, but then *I* am not his wife, so it does not matter. He will never speak to me as he would to her.”

“Indeed!” returned Brooke. “I do not know which to admire most, your consideration for your friend or the simple directness with which you carry out your plans!”

His tone was so unsympathetic, so hard, that Stasie felt impelled to put herself right with him. She had grown to believe firmly in his superiority, in his sound judgment; perhaps he thought she was wrong to have written to him! she would tell him all. “I will tell you all about it,” she said, blushing now, and raising her dark eyes, moist and entreating, expecting an encouraging smile. She met a smile, certainly, but not an encouraging one.

“Pray do not confide any romantic secrets to me, Miss Verner! I am far too commonplace a fellow to be worthy of them; besides, I have no shadow of right to any explanation from you. Of course your commands as to secrecy will be implicitly obeyed;” and Brooke paused, thinking

how well he had kept himself clear of Miss Verner's schemes and coquetries.

She looked at him in surprise, then flushed crimson, and said, "You are quite right, I will not trouble you!"

"Here comes one of your cavaliers!" exclaimed Brooke, "eagerly searching for his lost princess! I must resign you, and bid you good-night too. I see Mrs. Marsden is looking for me; I promised to see her and her daughters home."

"Good-night," said Stasie, mastering as best she could a horrible choking sensation in her throat, while an overwhelming sense of shame and degradation made the blood tingle in her ears and quiver in her lips. To have offered her confidence and have it rejected with such polite mockery! What a fool she was, and how ignorant of the usages of society! How was she to learn them? who would teach her!

Her new partner found her silent and distraught, and by no means so fascinating as young Pearson proclaimed her to be; and, the dance over, Stasie declared she was quite tired out, turned a deaf ear to Mr. Pearson's entreaties that she would wait for one more waltz, found out Mrs. Harding,

who was rather anxious to return home, and finally unearthed Mr. Harding, who was dosing in the card-room.

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The sense of deep mortification still clung to Stasie when the morning light broke in upon her slumbers next day. It was none the less deep because it was modified by the introduction of a new ingredient. She was angry with herself, but still more so with Dr. Brooke ; she was also alarmed and ashamed to perceive, in the introspection which the change in his manner induced, that she had grown quite fond of him—on the verge of falling in love with him ! A man who had never sought her,—who had never shown her the slightest lover-like attention,—only a quiet, gentle, almost condescending interest in her crude ideas. She might well be ashamed of such weakness ! she had always despised and pitied the women she had read and heard of who had given their love unsought. It was always incomprehensible to her that such a thing could be, and here she was almost over the precipice herself. Is it possible that Dr. Brooke—experienced man of the world as he was—perceived what she now began

to suspect, and took this method to save her from throwing herself at his head! It was too maddening! She wished she could scourge herself with scorpions! She would have willingly seared her heart with hot irons could she thereby have obliterated the consciousness of this degradation. That she could surmount and subdue it she did not doubt; but how should she prove her strength and indifference to Dr. Brooke? Time would show.

She must be up and doing; she would not be idle any longer; she would press on Mr. Harding and Kharapet the necessity of preparing for her travels with Aunt Clem. She would see her aunt that very day, plan out their tour, and make an estimate of its cost, so as to be ready for all objections. It was too bad that she should be thus obliged to fight for her rights! *that* came of her loneliness; but she would show them (*i.e.* Messrs. Kharapet, Harding, and Wyatt) that *she* could hold her own, and if she could not get her own way quite, at any rate she would make herself supremely disagreeable. In this irritable and belligerent mood she descended to breakfast, which she found half over.

“So here you are at last!” exclaimed Mr. Harding, who was looking thundery. “You’ll find the tea cold, and the butter hot, for the ice is all melted!”

“I don’t care in the least,” said Stasie. “How are you, Mrs. Harding? I hope you are not very tired ——”

“I am sure I am!” exclaimed Mr. Harding. “How rational beings can encourage such fooleries and waste their money is more than I can understand! I cannot put up with any more of it. These cursed dissipations which interfere with the comfort of the family bread-winner ought not to be encouraged. I had to wait nearly half an hour for Mrs. Harding this morning before I could get a cup of tea!”

“And could you not pour it out yourself for once?” cried Stasie. “I protest if I ever marry I will marry some poor man, and then according to your theory, Mr. Harding, he will have to get up and pour out *my* tea, because my money will buy the bread.”

“I think your head has been turned with all the damned nonsense of last night,” returned Mr. Harding rather testily.

Mrs. Harding looked surprised.

“Not at all, I am quite logical—the toast, please,” said Stasie.

Mr. Harding took refuge in the *Times*. Stasie, being really independent of him, and, moreover, that sacred thing, “a woman of fortune,” he did not feel disposed to bluster and swear as usual.

After a few minutes’ silence Mrs. Harding began to talk of the people they had met the evening before, interrupted now and then by inarticulate growls indicative of disapprobation from her husband.

At length he exclaimed, “What a blank nuisance that Mrs. Parker is dead—died three days ago!”

“Who is Mrs. Parker?” asked his wife.

“Oh, you never know anything,” he said roughly. “She had agreed to take one of my Sefton Park houses on lease, and everything was ready for her signature when she came back to town. She had gone to the Isle of Wight for change of air, and now she is dead. I wonder if her daughter will take it, or if she is in any way committed. I must see Williams. I thought I had a capital tenant. It’s a blank nuisance,” he

repeated, and soon after he rose from table. "If Kharapet comes here to-day don't ask him to dinner," he said. "I want to have one evening in peace. It's all very well now and then, but, by George, the fellow lives here ; and," to his wife, "you had better begin to think seriously of going out of town. Look about you, and look alive ; don't leave everything to be hurried and scrambled at the last, *as* usual. Time is money—you must never forget *that*," going to the door and opening it. "Hullo ! Here's a long scratch on the panel—a scratch as if done with a pin on purpose ! Look here ! Don't you care enough about your house to get up and see the mischief those blank, blank, careless servants do ?"

Mrs. Harding rose hastily and went to the door. "Yes, it is provoking ; but the scratch is not very deep—you can only see it in a particular light."

"*You* would never see it in any light ! Now I expect you to find out who is responsible for that door by the time I return. I'd have the servants up myself only I must catch Williams," and he left the room, closing the door noisily behind him.

Mrs. Harding returned to her seat with a slight sigh, and Stasie looked at her in wonder, not untinged with contempt, at her amazing patience. It was a bright, warm, summer morning; the open windows admitted the perfume of the mignonette in the flower-boxes; the water-carts went slowly past, making a momentary freshness; that especially summer cry, "All a-blowin' and a-growin'" came repeatedly from itinerant florists. All seemed full of joyous, sunny life thought Stasie, yet how bitter and disappointing were the realities which lay beneath. She was, as we know, in a state of irritation, and she felt especially wrathful against Mr. Harding, because, for his wife's sake and also from a natural sense of good-breeding, she had suppressed more than one sharp speech that rose to her lips. It was this sense of irritation that prompted her to the unusual imprudence of saying to her hostess as the outer door was audibly shut, "Is he *ever* pleased?"

"Sometimes, I believe," returned Mrs. Harding with rather a sad smile. "But he rarely betrays it."

"I know it is very rude and wrong of me to say

it, dear Mrs. Harding; but *why* are you always so sweet and patient? I am sure it would do you both so much good if you fired up sometimes."

Mrs. Harding shook her head. "I daresay it would be better for Mr. Harding to have married a woman of stronger character than myself, but as for me, I shall never get out of my groove *now*."

Stasie forced herself to be silent. She had long perceived the bitter bondage in which her friend was held, but to-day she was disposed to champion all the oppressed, and hit the oppressors hard. However, she contented herself by crossing to where Mrs. Harding sat and kissing her brow. "It is too fine to stay indoors," she said. "I will go out with the children. Let me take them into the Botanic Gardens. Nurse need not come. I mean Willie and Ethel—I cannot quite manage Johnnie."

"Thank you, dear. I have some shopping to do and will take him with me. After luncheon I am going to call on Mrs. Marsden. Will you come with me?"

"No, thank you. I want to spend the afternoon with my aunt."

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The open air, the bright sunshine, the necessity of listening and attending to her young companions did Stasie good. She returned to the house graver, more composed, and most firmly resolved to put Dr. Brooke out of her head and heart. She was not, she flattered herself, the sort of girl to sit down and mope ; she would fill the empty chamber of her heart with nobler guests than had yet dwelt there, and take up her life in earnest.

As soon as luncheon was over Mrs. Harding went away to keep her appointment with Dr. Brooke, who was to meet her at his friend's house, and Stasie went to her room to dress for her expedition. She had scarce reached it when the servant overtook her with a card bearing the name of

Mr. A. Vandaleur Pearson,
—th Lancers.

"Did you say Mrs. Harding was not at home?" asked Stasie, feeling vexed at this interruption.

"Yes'm, and then the gentleman asked for you."

"I will put on my hat and go down ; he will not stay long if he thinks I am going out."

Mr. Pearson met Stasie with many apologies for detaining her, but he was the bearer of a note to Mrs. Harding, the contents of which he knew—perhaps Miss Verner would open and answer it.

“I don’t quite like to open Mrs. Harding’s note,” said Stasie, hesitating.

“You needn’t mind, it is about yourself,” cried the young lancer eagerly; whereupon Stasie opened it and read. It asked dear Mrs. Harding if her charming young friend would like to accompany the writer to the opera on the following evening, as she had a box and a place therein very much at Miss Verner’s service, “if Mrs. Harding would allow her to join their party.”

Young Pearson watched her as she read, thinking how awfully well she looked in a large gray straw hat, turned up at one side, and lined with velvet of the same colour, though she was so much paler than last night.

“How very good of your mother!” cried Stasie, looking up from the note; “pray thank her for me. I should like so much to go, but I cannot say yes or no till I have seen Mrs. Harding, though I am sure she will allow me. I will write

this evening directly I see her, if Lady Pearson will be so kind as to keep the place open."

"Yes, of course she will ; I'll answer for that. Hope you are not very tired this morning, Miss Verner?"

"A little," said Stasie; "but I enjoyed the dance."

"So did I; never enjoyed a dance so much before. I suppose I must not keep you—you are going out?" a little entreatingly.

"Yes, I am going to see my aunt, who has been ill, and ——"

"Mr. Kharapet!" said Jane, throwing open the door.

Mr. Vandaleur Pearson looked a little surprised as Hormuz came in with his softly gliding step and graceful bow.

A gleam of startled anger flashed in his eyes when he found Stasie *tête-à-tête* with a fashionable good-looking young man.

"Oh, Hormuz," cried Stasie with easy familiarity, "I am going to Aunt Clem's; will you come with me?"

"Yes, certainly; I am at your service." Mr. Pearson, not being asked to sit down, thought he had best bow himself out.

“I will be sure to write this evening,” said Stasie, shaking hands with him.

“Pray do ; sorry not to have seen Mrs. Harding.”

“Who is that young man?” said Hormuz solemnly, as the door closed upon him.

“Mr. Pearson—Sir Frederic’s son. I danced with him last night. Isn’t he nice? He has brought me an invitation from his mother to go to the opera! so very kind of her!” and Stasie went across the room to place it in Mrs. Harding’s blotting-book.

Kharapet felt giddy with a spasm of rage and fear. If these insolent young swells and their designing mothers had begun to gather round Stasie, might they not rob him of what he looked upon as his legitimate property—his undoubted right. Deep in his inmost heart he vowed that no one should take her or hers from him; all hesitation—all memory of Mr. Harding’s counsels, were swept away by the wave of fear and passion that swept over him.

“Stasie,” he said. Something in his tone startled her; she turned quickly. He was standing by the sofa, his hand resting on the back; he

looked deadly white, his large black eyes fixed on her with an expression of pain.

"What is the matter? are you ill?" and she came over to him in some anxiety.

"I am sick to death for love of you!" he exclaimed in a hoarse voice. "It kills me to see other men near you."

Stasie stepped back in dismay—there was a pause.

"Do you hear me," he began again almost harshly. "I love you! you must be my wife, Stasie!" then, as she stood overpowered with averted eyes, blushing to the roots of her hair with distress, nay, horror, at this unexpected outburst, Kharapet came nearer, thinking she was only surprised, that after a few moments to take in his words, she would confess that she now knew she also loved him. "You seemed an angel to me," he went on, pressing his slender hands together. "An angel of light and loveliness from the first, and now! I cannot live without you! You possess my soul! And you do not hate me, Stasie? You have always kind words and looks for me! Promise to be my wife, my love, my rose; give me those fair hands

and sweet lips and lovely eyes, and I will be your slave. You shall do what you like! and if you trust your money with me I will double and treble it before long! You shall have jewels and beauteous raiment, for all that I have is and will be yours! Say you will love me, Stasie." He stretched out his arms with a sudden passionate gesture, almost touching her.

Stasie, shrinking away, felt she must speak. She was frightened, but also grieved; there was unmistakable sincerity in his voice and eyes.

"Oh! I am so grieved, Hormuz. I wish you did not care about me. Of course I like you, you have been so good to me, but I always considered you a sort of—of uncle. I do not want to marry any one! I could not."

"Ah! sweetest! that is but a young girl's unawakened fancy. Let me teach you, beloved, how to love."

"You shall do nothing of the kind," cried Stasie with a sudden sharp repulsion. "That is," regretting her own abruptness, "I do not think you could! I don't mean to say I will never marry, but I am quite determined to enjoy a little freedom before I give it up. I am a

mere school-girl, too, and have to learn quantities of things before I am fit to be married !”

“ Then let me hope,” said Kharapet, considerably chilled by her firmness, and almost haughty avoidance of his touch ; “ I will wait for you ! You cannot be so hard and cold as to turn from the natural joys of woman’s life ; let me be your friend until I can win your love !”

“ I shall always be glad of your friendship, Hormuz,” she returned, growing pale, while her manner became colder and more composed. “ But do not think of love ; there are differences of nature between us. Why, you would not be happy with me. I like everything you dislike, everything that—— there”——interrupting herself——“ there is no use in talking about it ! Be my friend, my valued friend, but never think of being more.”

“ You shall not kill my hopes !” exclaimed Kharapet. “ Promise me at least, to atone for the pain, the agony you cost me, that you will keep this conversation secret from *all*——from your aunt, from Mr. and Mrs. Harding——may I trust you, Stasie ?”

“ You may ! Indeed I would much rather

say nothing about it, and *you*—will you promise to put the thought of me out of your mind?”

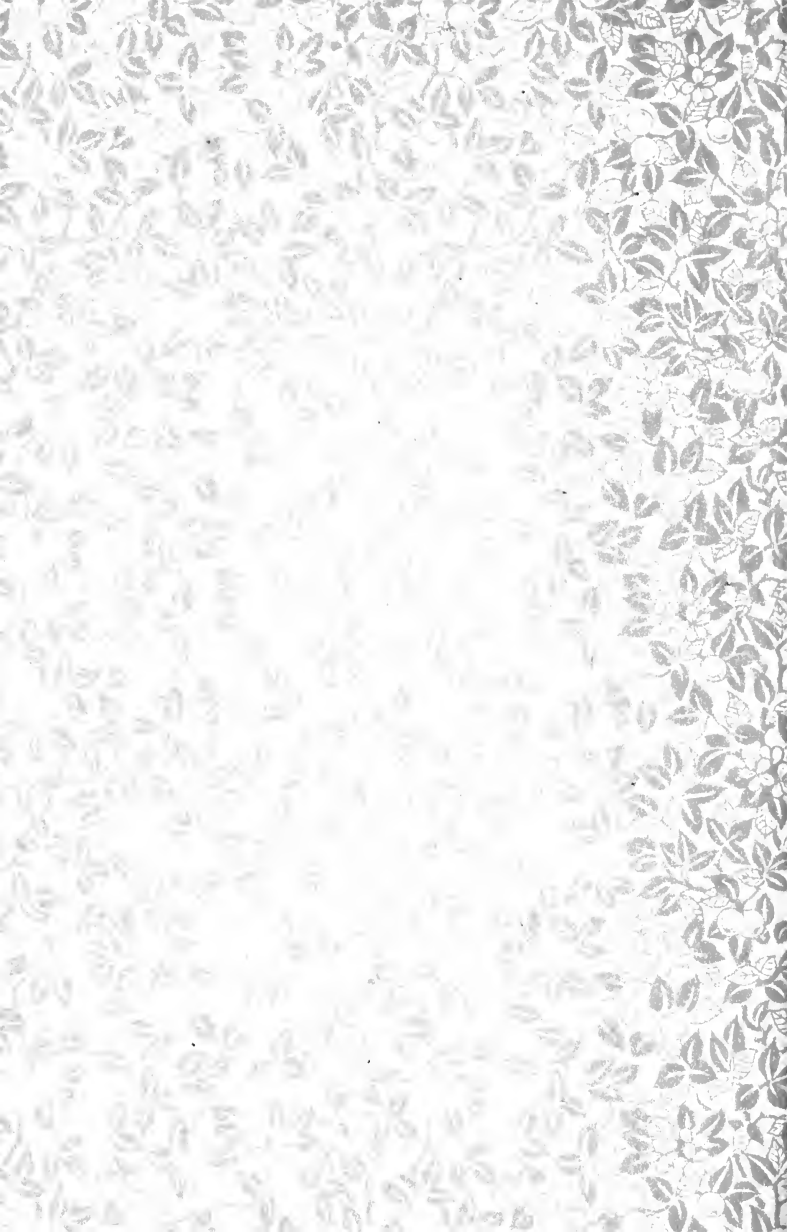
Kharapet bowed his head with an air of despondency, which touched Stasie.

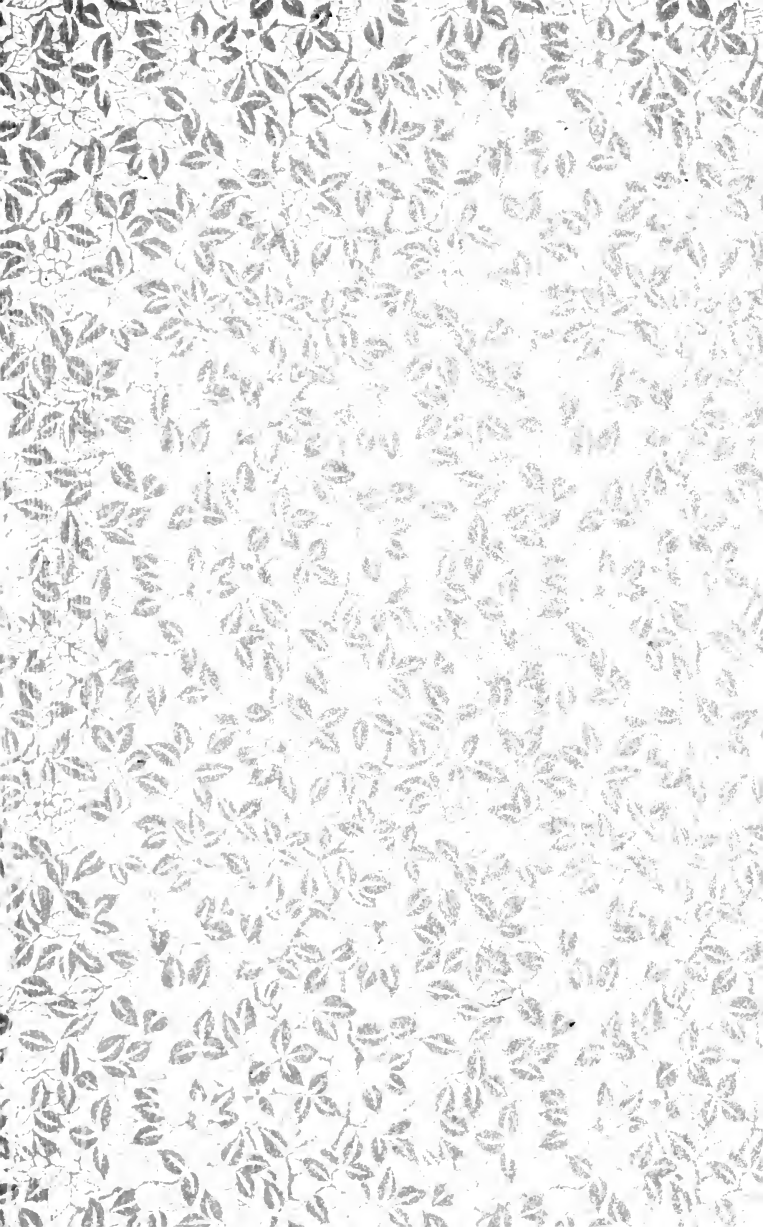
“Is there then *no* chance for me?” he said slowly.

“I must speak the truth, Hormuz, there is *none*.” Without a word he turned and crept noiselessly out of the room.

END OF VOL. I.

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